

Increasing Access to High-Demand Occupational Training

An Exploration of G3's Recruitment and Enrollment Strategies

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Get A Skill, Get A Job, Get Ahead (G3) is a state-funded last-dollar scholarship program for students enrolling in eligible associate degree, certificate, and noncredit occupational training programs in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) in five high-demand fields: early childhood education, healthcare, information technology, public safety, and skilled trades (construction and manufacturing). Launched in the 2021-22 academic year, the G3 initiative aims to increase enrollment, persistence, completion, and labor market success for low-to-middle-income learners. G3 has evolved over the past two years along with VCCS priorities to include a specific focus on boosting college enrollment and success of adult, Black and Hispanic, and low-income learners.

In this brief, we highlight early insights from a study of G3 implementation and outcomes. Early analysis by VCCS shows that colleges are making progress in increasing enrollment in the five high-demand fields listed above. We draw on published enrollment and outcome data from VCCS and interview data collected from eight of the 23 community colleges implementing the G3 program to examine college-level G3 outreach, recruitment, and enrollment strategies and the process for awarding G3 aid. These early touch points affect who enrolls in G3 programs, the amount and type of

aid students receive, and their success in meeting education and career goals. Findings suggest that colleges are tailoring their messaging to communities of interest and in some cases integrating their messaging and recruitment to stretch limited resources. Findings also point to the ways colleges are seeking to make the application and onboarding process more transparent and supported in order to foster successful enrollment for students.

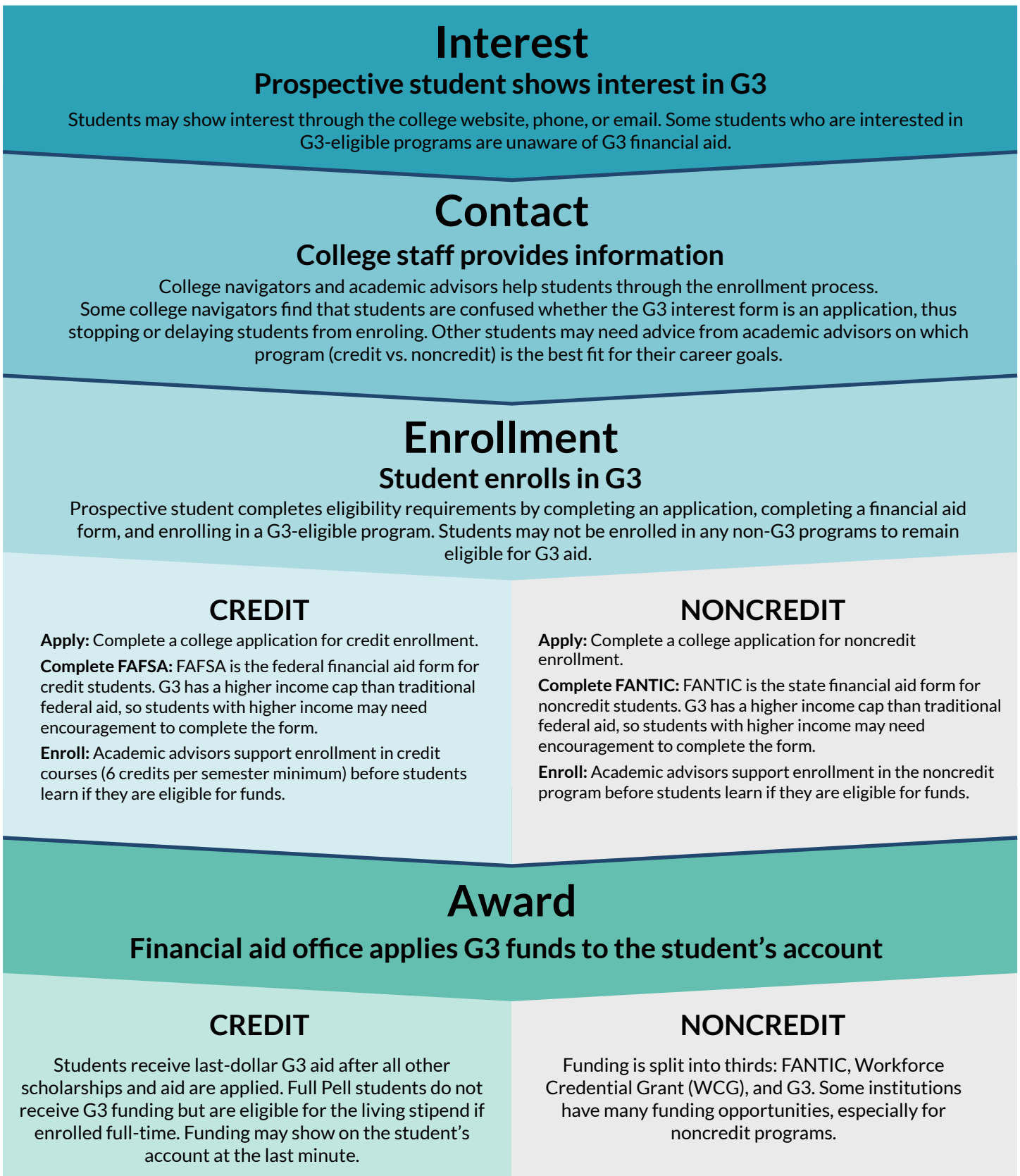
The study is being conducted through a research partnership between the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University; VCCS; and the University of Pennsylvania. We aim for our findings to have value for VCCS and its institutions; we also expect them to be relevant for efforts outside Virginia that intend to use financial aid to increase participation in occupational programs, especially among historically underserved populations.

Get a Skill, Get a Job, Get Ahead (G3): How It Works

Developed by a coalition of workforce stakeholders including VCCS, workforce boards, legislators, and industry representatives, G3 was created with the explicit purpose of providing financial assistance to low- and middle-income Virginians who are enrolled in occupational training programs in one of five high-demand fields.¹ Colleges submit their eligible programs for approval to the State Board for Community Colleges; once the programs are approved, a college can begin awarding G3 funds to qualified students enrolled in approved programs. It is a “last-dollar” scholarship program, which means that aid is applied only after all other federal and state aid is provided to eligible students for tuition, fees, and books.² According to VCCS, the goal of G3 is to reduce financial barriers to enrolling in—and completing—an education program that leads to a career with benefits and family-sustaining wages. G3 program design reflects existing research on the positive relationship between need-based aid and last-dollar scholarships and enrollment, particularly among lower income students (Baum et al., 2023; Collom, 2023; Nguyen, 2020).

To receive G3 aid, a student must (1) be eligible for Virginia in-state tuition, (2) have a total household income less than or equal to 400% of the federal poverty level (roughly \$100,000 for a family of four), (3) be enrolled or accepted for enrollment at a Virginia public community college and in an approved program, (4) be enrolled in a minimum of six credit hours per semester in a G3-eligible credit program or be enrolled in a G3-eligible noncredit program, and (5) have applied for federal and state financial aid programs for which they may be eligible. In addition to the last-dollar scholarship, G3 provides a stipend of \$900 per semester for living costs beyond tuition—referred to as the Student Support Incentive Grant (SSIG)—to full-time Pell-eligible enrollees (see Table 1). The G3 design incorporates several other supports for student participation, completion, and advancement to longer term credentials and degrees. These include dedicated advisors responsible for recruiting,

Figure 1. G3 Program Enrollment and Financial Award Process



enrolling, and supporting G3 students and clearly defined stackable pathways in approved credit and noncredit programs.³

Table 1. G3 Financial Assistance Eligibility Requirements (for Credit Programs)

Last-Dollar Scholarship	Student Support Incentive Grant (SSIG)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrolled in at least six credit hours in G3-eligible program(s) • Household income of less than or equal to 400% of the federal poverty level • VA resident (in-state students only) • Eligible for Title IV aid (as determined by FAFSA) • Meet satisfactory academic progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrolled in at least 12 credit hours (full-time) • Full Pell Grant recipient • Expected family contribution = 0

Note. SSIG is intended to reduce the number of hours a student has to work so the student can focus on studying.

Figure 1 shows the generalized G3 student enrollment and financial aid application and award process. Due in part to program eligibility requirements and the last-dollar scholarship design, some steps in the process are complex and may be confusing to applicants. We discuss this complexity in greater detail below in a section on our findings.

In response to both the pandemic and racial inequities across the U.S., in fall 2021 VCCS prioritized improvements to G3 aimed at enrolling, retaining, and graduating low-income adults who were most impacted by the pandemic and have been historically underserved by postsecondary education. In implementing G3 improvements, VCCS was informed by available research on policy actions that can help reduce disparities in state financial aid and scholarship utilization and that can increase access to state need-based aid among low-income and historically underserved students. These policy actions include making program details transparent, increasing academic and nonacademic supports, and reducing eligibility requirements such as full-time attendance (Baum et al., 2023; Cummings et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023).

Research Activities

Our research activities were aimed at identifying commonalities and variations in marketing, recruitment, and enrollment processes across VCCS colleges. The analysis included a review of system-level marketing materials and policy guidance, a scan of the websites of all 23 colleges, and interviews with system and college staff at eight colleges.

Discussion of VCCS system-level marketing materials. In the fall of 2022, we began with a discussion involving VCCS system office staff and the vendor hired to develop G3 marketing strategies and materials for use by colleges. We reviewed materials that VCCS and its vendor provided colleges as well as system-level policy documents.

Scan of VCCS college websites. Later in the fall of 2022, the CCRC team analyzed Virginia community college website pages that refer and/or link to G3. Combining data-scraping techniques and manual webpage review, we documented how the 23

VCCS colleges marketed G3 on their websites. We focused on design and presentation characteristics, including text, messaging, ease of use, look and feel, representational diversity, the extent to which sites focused on affordability and tuition assistance, and the prioritization of responding quickly to queries by a knowledgeable admissions staffer. Our analysis was guided by the understanding that these characteristics can affect a college’s success in turning interest into enrollment.

Interviews with college personnel. Throughout the spring of 2023, we conducted interviews at eight Virginia community colleges that are in different parts of the state and have different economic and demographic profiles. We met with staff from the offices of academic affairs, workforce development, student support, advising, financial aid, and enrollment management and marketing.

Early Enrollment Data

VCCS system data for the past two academic years indicate both speedy implementation of G3 across the system in academic year 2021–22 and continued growth in eligible programs, enrollment, and aid disbursement in 2022–23. In 2021–22, over 1,050 associate degree and certificate programs and 650 noncredit programs were approved as G3 eligible, almost half of them in healthcare. In 2022–23, the number rose to 1,068 associate degree and certificate programs and 820 noncredit programs. G3 served 12,594 students in 2022–23, compared to 11,084 in 2021–22 (see Table 2 for the year-over-year change).⁴ About 25% of these students were new to VCCS, whereas the system-wide rate of new (versus returning) students is only 7%.

Table 2. G3 Student Enrollment by Credit and Noncredit Programs

Program Type	2021-22	2022-23	Change
Credit	8,272	8,772	6.0%
Noncredit	2,867	3,904	36.2%
Total	11,139	12,676	13.8%

Note. In 2021-22, 55 G3 students were enrolled in both credit and noncredit programs. In 2022-23, 82 G3 students were enrolled in both.

The number of VCCS students receiving G3 aid increased 13.8% from the program’s first year of implementation to its second, a period when total VCCS enrollments were fairly flat. Enrollment in noncredit Workforce Credential Grant (WCG) programs⁵—designed to provide rapid entry into the workforce, particularly for adults, through one-course training programs—grew much faster than enrollments in credit associate degree and certificate programs (36.2% versus 6% year-over-year change). However, even with the rapid growth in noncredit enrollments, the large majority of G3 students enroll in credit rather than noncredit programs (69% versus 31%).

Table 3. Aid Disbursements by Type to G3 Students

Expenditure Category	2021-22	2022-23	Change
Aid for students in credit and noncredit programs	\$18.6 million	\$20.5 million	10.2%
• Aid for students in credit programs only (associate degree & certificate programs)	\$14.9 million	\$16.6 million	11.4%
– Last-dollar scholarship (tuition assistance, mandatory fees, book costs)	\$11.4 million	\$13.2 million	15.8%
– SSIG living stipend	\$3.5 million	\$3.4 million	-2.9%
• Aid for students in noncredit programs only (WCG programs)	\$3.7 million	\$3.9 million	5.4%

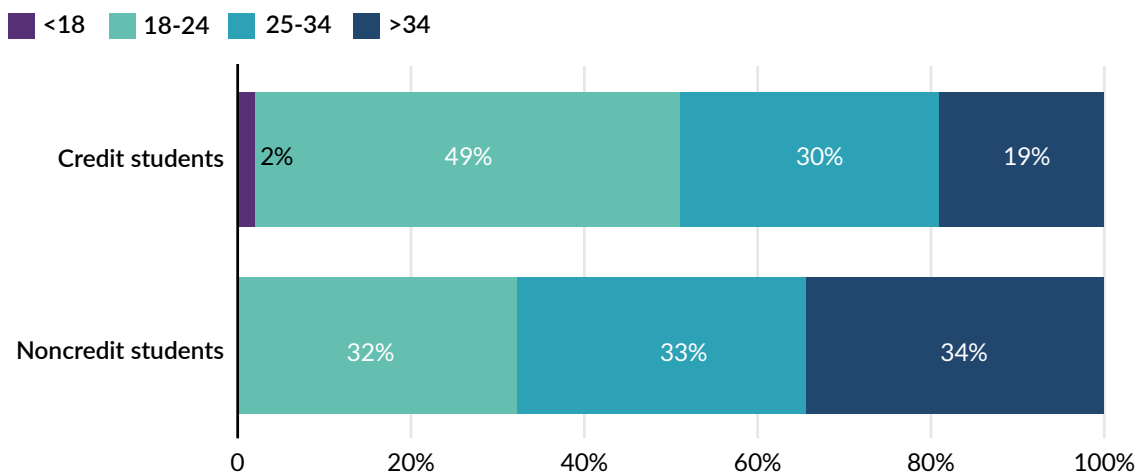
Source: VCCS (2023).

The state legislature appropriated \$34.5 million for G3 in both 2021–22 and 2022–23. Table 2 summarizes the year-over-year changes in disbursements for G3. Funds disbursed for last-dollar aid in credit programs increased 11.4%, from \$14.9 million to \$16.6 million in G3’s second year. Disbursements for G3 noncredit programs rose 5.4%, from \$3.7 million to \$3.9 million. Credentials earned by students in both credit and noncredit programs also rose: The number of students earning credit credentials increased 17.3% in the second year, and credentials earned in noncredit programs jumped 37.8%.

According to VCCS, over half of G3 recipients (54%) have household earnings at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Six out of 10 G3 students are women, a percentage that is roughly the same as the gender split in academic credit programs.

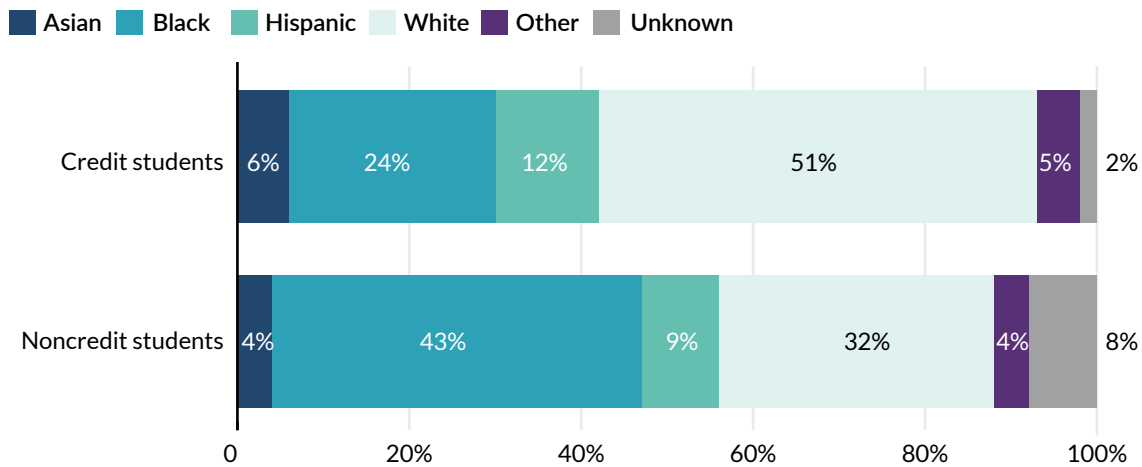
As shown in Figure 2, older individuals are overrepresented in G3 compared to their enrollment in VCCS colleges. Just under half (49%) of G3 credit students are 25 years or older, whereas 34% of all students across VCCS are 25 and above (excluding dual enrolled high school students). Not surprisingly, the overrepresentation of older learners in G3 is pronounced in G3-approved noncredit programs, where 67% of G3 students are 25 years of age or older.

Figure 2. G3 Credit and Noncredit Students by Age (2022-23)



Source: VCCS (2023).

Figure 3. G3 Credit and Noncredit Students by Race/Ethnicity (2022-23)



Source: VCCS (2023).

The racial/ethnic composition of G3 credit students is similar to that of the general student population of Virginia’s community colleges: 6% Asian, 24% Black, 12% Hispanic, and 51% White in 2022–23 (Figure 3). Black students are modestly overrepresented in G3 compared to their proportion in the overall student population (18%). Noncredit G3 recipients, by contrast, are more diverse than both the general community college population and credit G3 recipients: Among G3 noncredit students, Black students comprise 43% of enrollments, compared to 24% of G3 credit enrollments. Enrollments by Black G3 students in noncredit G3 programs rose from 38% in G3’s first year to 43% in the second year. Whether this is a positive development requires additional research evidence on completion and post-completion career and college outcomes.

Overall, available VCCS data on G3 enrollment show early progress in expanding enrollment in specific high-demand workforce fields. Early data on disbursement of annual appropriated funds suggest that G3 aid could be extended to a greater number of students in credit-bearing occupational programs, though some colleges are seeing enrollment and disbursement growth in noncredit programs. Our research indicates this is in part a function of program features (e.g., credit-hour requirements and last-dollar scholarship design). It also suggests that strengthening G3 outreach, recruitment, and enrollment might enable colleges to help more Virginians successfully enroll in and complete programs in high-demand fields.

Marketing and Outreach

Across eight colleges, we found consistent messaging around G3 that emphasizes the program as an opportunity to get on an affordable path of occupational training leading to a high-demand job. Colleges use this messaging in efforts designed to generate interest among prospective and continuing students, including in G3-

specific websites, outreach to high school and continuing students, and outreach to specific communities of interest.

Colleges aim to make G3 recruitment messaging simple and clear. Materials provided by the VCCS system office when the program launched helped college personnel develop a solid understanding of system-level goals and priorities for G3 that in turn informed their marketing and recruitment strategies. In general, colleges frame their G3 messaging to students in terms of an opportunity to improve economic and employment circumstances by enrolling in an approved high-demand occupational program. In their messaging, colleges emphasize that students might be eligible for tuition assistance and tend to downplay the mechanics of G3's last-dollar scholarship. According to one college navigator (an advisor who works with prospective students⁶), "When I talk to students, it is about, 'You may qualify for low-to-no-cost college in five high-demand tracks.'" A student services administrator explained, "G3 is complex when it comes to who actually gets the funding. We have to be careful about how we advertise it before we talk to the students." The complexity this administrator is referring to relates to a student not knowing whether they will receive funding until later in the enrollment process. For some colleges, it took several iterations to find the right balance between promoting high-demand workforce programming and tuition assistance. At one such college, an administrator explained that they initially marketed G3 as "free college" and that it took them a while to get comfortable telling students, "You may qualify for G3."

While messaging was similar across colleges, we observed variation in the ways colleges promote G3. Some colleges focus on G3 in their marketing and outreach, while others market community college or occupational training more broadly, and students may not learn about G3 as a specific program until they complete the FAFSA. According to one college administrator,

G3 is always a part of anything we are doing from a marketing standpoint. It's my most marketable sell to say you can have low- or no-cost college. That messaging is used strategically in all of our tactics.

Another college staffer explained,

[G3 is] in conversations we're having with students as they are coming in, talking about funding options and how they can get through without debt. ... So, it's always in some form of outreach that we're having with students.

We learned of several colleges that market G3 as part of a specific occupational pathway such as healthcare. Illustrating this approach, a college staff member noted, "I'm a big believer in program-specific marketing. I try to encourage our folks to market our programs as 'Get a job in X field.'" Under this approach, a college includes information about financial resources made available through G3 for eligible students along with other pertinent information. This variation suggests that G3 is one of many opportunities and incentives (e.g., tuition assistance, programs in high-demand/high-wage fields, flexible schedules, and various support services) a college may highlight to attract students. Since G3 is complex and a potentially

unknown brand, this approach can be both economical and strategic.

Colleges use a range of marketing strategies to reach local audiences, particularly low-income adults. For the launch of G3, VCCS hired a marketing consultant to prepare informational and promotional materials that were packaged as a toolkit for use by the colleges. The toolkit contained web text and graphics; advertising materials for text, audio, and video; and messages tested with college personnel, employers, and others. VCCS encouraged colleges to customize these materials to fit their local economy, culture, and student base. Additionally, VCCS supported a statewide television and radio campaign, with commercials designed to reach adults often running later in the evening. College staff we interviewed indicated their goal was to ensure the advertising and web-based resources gave prospective students frequent and easy opportunities to reach admissions counselors who could guide them toward desired programs. They also noted it was important to have systems in place to ensure that knowledgeable college personnel responded quickly to student inquiries.

As G3 entered its second year (2022–23), colleges reported tailoring these ads to their local contexts and broadening their digital marketing to include social media. One college located in a community with a rapidly growing Latino population, for example, produced and has been distributing Spanish-language marketing materials, including television ads.

Radio, television, and social media advertising has been used to build awareness of G3 and direct prospective students to colleges' G3 web pages. According to one college official, its "G3 website has become a front door for G3." A scan of the 23 colleges' websites found that a majority characterize G3 as a possible source of tuition assistance for enrolling in a program that could lead to a good job. However, most websites do not delve into the complexity of financial aid. Several underscore the potential to avoid debt, which they view as attractive to students who may not be eligible for other financial aid (such as those who already have a bachelor's degree or are eligible for loans only). The webpages draw on the materials initially provided by VCCS, including explanations of who is eligible, how to enroll for G3 aid, and which G3-eligible programs are offered at the college (by program majors and/or credential pathways). Some colleges use more video materials and engaging visuals than others. Some appear to focus on increasing the yield from online interest by providing easy-to-use forms and buttons to simplify making a connection to college recruiting staff knowledgeable about G3.

It is not known which aspects of G3 web-based recruitment are most important for getting students interested or turning interest into an application. At present, data on student interest and how individuals first find out about G3 programs are not collected systematically for analytical purposes. According to our interviews with recruitment and admission staff, websites that include visuals that encourage students from diverse backgrounds to see themselves as belonging in a particular program may be more successful in stimulating student interest and turning that interest into an inquiry to staff. For example, a college administrator emphasized

the importance of defying stereotypes by using a photo of a woman in a welding helmet or of a man in nursing scrubs for recruiting materials. Many staff also believe that response buttons and forms on the website that are easy to use and navigate and that enable staff to engage prospective students quickly are more effective. One administrator, for example, spoke approvingly about the simplicity of their college's website and the fact that students receive a response from a real person rather than a chatbot.

Colleges market G3 to high school and current community college students.

Although community college occupational training programs tend to enroll students who are older than those in transfer programs, there has been an increased focus in recent years on career pathways in K-12 that lead to jobs and postsecondary training (Lindsay et al., 2024). G3 creates an additional enrollment incentive for traditional-age students interested in occupational training. But with K-12 enrollment in Virginia declining, colleges are also looking at their current students as candidates for G3 and have devised efforts to reach them (Lombard, 2024).

G3 recruitment efforts are often folded into regular college admissions outreach to high school students, including informational fairs at high schools, on the college campus, and in the community. At these events, college staff and high school career coaches promote G3 by emphasizing that eligible programs prepare students for in-demand jobs and that students may receive financial support.

To differing degrees, the colleges we studied also market G3 internally to students who are already enrolled. This can mean promoting G3-eligible programs to those who are still trying to figure out their chosen program of study; it often means contacting students in G3-eligible programs by text message or other means to let them know they may be eligible for G3 aid. Most of our interviewees with recruitment responsibilities saw internal marketing as particularly cost effective. At one college, admissions staff identify and reach out to students who are G3 eligible in the current academic year but have not enrolled for the summer or fall terms. They also seek to reengage students who completed only some of their G3 program. At another college, recruiters focus almost exclusively on internal marketing, figuring that many students are unaware of their eligibility and might find enrollment in a G3-eligible program attractive.

Colleges partner with community organizations tied to underserved communities.

Some colleges in our sample described long-standing relationships with local community-based organizations and tapped those relationships to recruit students for G3. Our analysis suggests this partnership strategy creates two important opportunities. First, it provides the colleges access to populations these organizations serve, including racially minoritized adults and adults who may be interested in learning more about affordable training programs. Second, partnerships allow for messaging from a trusted source, perhaps increasing credibility for target populations. Recruiting staff reported working with organizations such as the United Way, churches, and One Stop Centers to promote G3. An admissions staff member at one college noted work with the Virginia Department of Veterans Services to

introduce veterans to shorter term certificate programs offered through G3. Some colleges also turn to local workforce councils for help recruiting students into G3-eligible programs. Through these partnerships, colleges bolster ways that prospective students can learn about and access G3 funding.

The Enrollment Process and Its Complexities

Research has shown that the multi-step process required to enroll in college and qualify for financial aid can be a barrier to entry for some students (Gellman & Meyer, 2023). In the case of G3, the process is complicated by certain program features. Specifically, students must choose a program of study that is eligible for G3. They must also apply for financial aid by completing (for credit students) the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) but will only be awarded G3 funds if there is a remaining tuition and fees balance after all other financial aid has been applied. Lastly, credit students must register for a minimum of six credit hours of coursework in the G3-eligible program. Our analysis suggests an unintended consequence of this complexity is that the pool of potential G3 recipients shrinks as some students are diverted from the program by the multi-step process, while others who are on the margin (i.e., students who enroll in fewer than six credit hours in an approved program or who are mid-to-low income but do not complete the FAFSA) cannot qualify for G3.⁷

Dedicated advising staff help students navigate complexities, learn about G3, and enroll in G3-eligible programs. A student may enter the enrollment process aware or unaware of G3, having decided on a program of study or not, planning to apply for financial aid or not, and planning to enroll full- or part-time, which makes good information critical to their enrollment. Admissions and student services staff we spoke with described the G3 application and enrollment processes as potentially confusing on the front end due to program eligibility requirements and on the back end due to the last-dollar scholarship design. As a result, some staff we interviewed are deliberate in simplifying decision-making by first helping students decide on a program aligned to their career goals, as was the case for this college navigator:

We want students to be enrolled in G3 programs, but ultimately, we want to do what's best for the student. So, I don't want to put them in a program for now just to get short-term funding if that program doesn't align with their ultimate career goals.

The group of prospective students applying to college explicitly because of the G3 benefits may already plan to enroll in an eligible program but may require advising on their credit or noncredit program options, financial aid application (discussed in the next subsection), the credential they should pursue, and the number of credits to enroll in. For the colleges in our sample, it is difficult to quantify the size of this group. But it appears that in the first two years of the program, G3 by itself is a driving force for enrollment for a relatively small proportion of students. Many

students appear unaware that they have been awarded G3 funds (along with other forms of financial aid) or that they are enrolling in an eligible program.

We also learned that students are sometimes confused about whether expressing interest in a G3-eligible program—on the web or at an informational event—is the same as enrolling, which is not the case. An admissions staff member noted that students can be unaware that they must complete an application and enroll in the college to receive G3 funds. These issues are all the more challenging for students choosing between enrolling in a credit or noncredit program, which are distinct divisions at many colleges. As an admissions staff member noted, “G3 is complicated to administer, so we wanted to make sure students do not have to navigate that.”

The system office and colleges have looked for ways to reduce the complexity of the application and enrollment process. Colleges rely primarily on two staff positions, G3 advisors and college navigators, to give students information about G3 and to help them apply and enroll in G3-eligible programs, although other staff also assist students. Funding for G3 advisors comes from a state appropriation. The position is designed to provide support to students to enroll and persist in G3-eligible programs and, in some instances, other programs of study. At some colleges, G3 advisors participate in outreach activities by conducting information sessions and being a point of contact for prospective students interested in G3-eligible programs.

Shortly after launching G3, the state allocated separate funds for college navigators, who serve as the initial point of contact for students expressing interest in the college. College navigators guide prospective students through the early stages of college exploration and application. Prospective students can connect with college navigators through various avenues, including the G3 website interest form. Navigators inform prospective students about the college and its programs and assess their potential eligibility for financial aid, including G3.

Both roles—G3 advisor and college navigator—add a layer of support, making the college application and enrollment process more accessible and student friendly. However, we did see variation in how colleges utilize these staff positions: Some colleges assign G3 advisors to serve G3 and the rest of the college, while others assign G3 advisors to support only the most highly enrolled G3-eligible programs or specific program pathways such as healthcare or information technology.

The prospect of a G3 award may encourage students to apply for financial aid, but the FAFSA process remains a hurdle. The prospect of scholarship money is the biggest, most immediate incentive for students to enroll in G3. In covering the costs of tuition, fees, and books, G3 reduces students’ out-of-pocket expenses, may allow them to work less while in college, and decreases the likelihood of students taking on debt to finance their education. And for low-income students who qualify for the SSIG stipend, G3 can subsidize a portion of their living expenses. To determine whether they qualify for G3 funding and how much they may receive, students must complete the FAFSA. Applicants to noncredit WCG workforce programs must complete a different application created by VCCS, the Financial Aid for Noncredit Training leading to Industry Credentials (FANTIC) form, and may also be eligible

to receive G3 aid. FAFSA collects information from students about their family income and expenses and determines their eligibility for federal and state financial aid, both of which must be exhausted before G3's last-dollar disbursement kicks in. In practice, this means that the exact amount of aid a student may receive cannot be determined up front. A financial aid staff member at one college explained that most students want to know in advance if they will be eligible for G3 funds before enrolling; however, per the requirements for receiving G3 funding, colleges cannot make that determination until a student has completed the FAFSA and enrolled in at least six credits in an eligible credit program.

Additionally, students may receive G3 funding but not know that G3 is the source of their tuition aid unless they look closely at their financial aid award letter or are informed by an advisor. The inconspicuousness of G3 funding becomes problematic in later semesters when students who are unaware they are G3 recipients make changes to their program of study or credit hours and lose eligibility for G3. Future analyses may examine these late-stage situations, including how often and which students shift from being eligible to ineligible for G3 aid.

Since FAFSA completion is required to receive G3 aid, VCCS and its colleges have sought ways to grow the pool of G3-eligible students by increasing FAFSA completion rates. An upcoming analysis (Bonilla & Sparks, forthcoming) shows that in each of the two years before G3 implementation, only about 44% of students completed the FAFSA. The same analysis shows that after G3 implementation, in 2021-22, roughly the same proportion of students (43%) completed the FAFSA.⁸ Although VCCS has not yet achieved its statewide goal, our interviews provide anecdotal evidence that advisors and navigators have actively encouraged prospective G3 students to complete the FAFSA. Encouragement alone, however, is likely insufficient to address the barriers posed by the complexity and administrative barriers of the financial aid application process. The FAFSA application and verification process is cumbersome, confusing, and time consuming, particularly for students with the greatest financial need (Dynarski et al., 2022; Perna et al., 2020). The recent rollout of the simplified FAFSA form has been delayed and required various fixes; it is unclear what effects, if any, this change will have on future FAFSA completion rates for students at VCCS colleges.

Financial aid and student services staff we interviewed echoed concerns about the FAFSA. They reported students not knowing that they must complete the FAFSA in order to qualify for G3 funds. Several colleges noted challenges for the large numbers of first-generation college students in understanding the financial aid process. Some interviewees noted that the FANTIC form required for noncredit G3 eligibility is shorter and requires students to provide less information, which makes completion easier.

VCCS and its colleges have worked to help students complete financial aid applications and to streamline the financial aid award process. Administrators in our sample reported increasing the number of staff who can help students complete financial aid applications. One college we visited developed student care teams that include

navigators to help with FAFSA completion. Through these teams, the financial aid staff works in tandem with college navigators “to avoid pushing students around person to person.” At one college, the financial aid office uses an open-door policy, where two staffers are always available to assist students. As one staff member explained,

We created an interest form for G3 programs with an assigned admissions coach and also changed some of the questions in the admission application to flag when a student chooses a G3-eligible program to follow up to make sure they fill out the FAFSA.

Another college assigns financial aid counselors to students who have started but not completed the FAFSA. Additionally, the VCCS financial aid office has automated students’ financial aid packages so aid is awarded in the order that eligibility dictates (e.g., Pell Grant before other state aid before G3). Aid decisions and disbursement processes that were initially manual have been automated to shorten the time between students’ expression of interest, enrollment, and securing of tuition assistance. Once a credit student is enrolled in a G3-eligible program for the semester (enrolling in at least six credits) and has completed the FAFSA, G3 aid is applied directly to the student’s outstanding tuition charges after other aid has been applied. In addition, all VCCS institutions are required to standardize their award notifications and make them available to students online. When a student receives a financial award for the first time or if there are modifications, they receive an email and are directed to the college portal, which provides directions on how to interpret the award.

Some colleges have combined or are considering combining their credit and noncredit enrollment processes. G3 has galvanized momentum around a “one-door” approach to student enrollment and onboarding at many of the colleges in our sample. This model integrates admissions, enrollment, and registration for credit career and technical education (CTE) programs and noncredit workforce programs. An administrator at one of the colleges in our sample said G3 played an important role in moving the college toward an integrated model: “It was the first time we saw [the credit and noncredit student] as the same student.” This administrator also reported that having two discrete processes and support teams did not benefit students: “If you were a [noncredit] workforce student, there was a separate, less visible help desk for the workforce division; we weren’t allowed to speak to the workforce students.” Now, any student who comes to the college goes, in the words of this administrator, to a “one-stop shop for credit and workforce” where they apply and get introduced to an admissions coach who helps them decide whether to apply to a credit or noncredit program.

Conclusion and Implications

This brief documents efforts by VCCS and its colleges to market G3 and support students through the steps required to receive funding. The findings illustrate how G3 has value beyond its core financial aid function as colleges’ G3 marketing activities

not only promote potential financial benefits but also serve to nudge students to explore high-demand occupations and create incentives for enrolling in programs of study with better labor market prospects. Our analysis also sheds light on what colleges might need to do to help a student get on an affordable pathway to a high-demand occupation:

- **Provide clear messaging related to the goal of a community college education, such as employment in a growing industry.** This may attract interest from a diverse group of prospective students who are prioritizing certain pathways rather than a particular scholarship. We saw examples of G3 positioned as a focus of this messaging or as one of many potential programs available to help students reach this goal.
- **Make messaging on affordability and feasibility more transparent.** Colleges are promoting G3 as one of multiple options that can help to cover the costs of students' education. This may increase the likelihood that interest converts to application. Information on the technical features of G3's last-dollar scholarship may contribute to confusion and may not need to be foregrounded.
- **Support knowledgeable staff and high-quality information resources that can shepherd students through multiple consequential decisions and action steps, including program choice and FAFSA (or FANTIC) completion, both of which determine G3 eligibility.** Since program choice upon enrollment is required for G3, more career guidance integrated into marketing and outreach may be beneficial. Students already enrolled in eligible programs who have not completed the FAFSA or are enrolled in fewer than six credits could be encouraged to take action to become eligible.
- **Take advantage of system encouragement of "one-door" approaches to student inquiries, enrollment, and program choice.** Efforts to better integrate recruitment and enrollment in credit CTE and noncredit workforce programs may be an opportunity for institutions to strengthen and streamline marketing, enrollment procedures, and advising in ways that can increase student access to G3-eligible programs and funds.

Looking Ahead

Over the course of this research partnership, we will continue to explore how G3 can increase enrollment, persistence, and completion in occupational training programs and, in doing so, make the outcomes of these programs more equitable. Upcoming quantitative analysis will describe the pool of early G3 recipients in comparison to the pool of eligible students and look at trends in FAFSA completion. Later quantitative analyses will explore the effects of G3 policy features on student outcomes, such as requiring students to attend full-time in order to receive the living stipend, and whether the G3 aid amount is large enough to encourage lower income students to enroll in the five high-demand fields. Additionally, the research team will share

findings on early implementation of G3 in a forthcoming report. That publication will detail the program features and supports available to help students complete their program, get good jobs, and move on to next-level credentials.

Endnotes

- 1 In the [G3 legislation](#), a “high-demand field” is defined as a discipline or field in which there is a shortage of skilled workers to fill current and anticipated additional job vacancies.
- 2 See VCCS (n.d.) for a full list of financial aid programs available to Virginia community college students.
- 3 Approved programs must be a part of a “stackable pathway” whereby working adults can start with skills training that leads to a certificate or other credential with immediate value in the job market. When ready, they can “stack” additional certificates on a pathway toward an associate degree.
- 4 At the time of writing, only two years of G3 enrollment data were available. Although we report on enrollments in G3’s first two years, readers should resist drawing conclusions about trends until data from 2023–24 and beyond are available.
- 5 The WCG program reduces the student cost of specific training programs by two thirds. These programs are part of [FastForward](#).
- 6 We describe this position in more detail in a section below.
- 7 We examine these issues in further detail in forthcoming publications, one of which uses administrative data to quantify and examine those students who meet some but not all eligibility requirements and those students who receive G3 funding.
- 8 FAFSA completion rates are based on calculations using administrative data from VCCS. The sample excludes students who enrolled at a community college through dual enrollment and students who were nonresidents of Virginia or identified as nonresident aliens.

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