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EDITORIAL: Education initiatives offer brighter future

BY THE EDITORIAL PAGE STAFF OF THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Dec 12, 2019



Students in Germanna Community College's Gladys P. Todd Academy pose with White House Press Corps photographer Fred Watkins in 2018.

Germanna Community College

GETTING YOUNG people off to a good start with education and job skills can make all the difference between a future of personal and professional progress, and one that languishes in self-doubt and under-achievement. A couple of stories in the news recently spotlight programs and initiatives that help level the playing field for students seeking a path to success.

Nearly five years ago, with one of the many gifts bestowed upon the Fredericksburg area by her Sunshine Lady Foundation, Doris Buffett gave \$2 million to create the Gladys P. Todd Academy. In cooperation with Germanna Community College, the program was designed to pay dual-enrollment tuition for primarily minority, first-generation college students.

By taking classes at Germanna, low-income high school students at James Monroe High School and Spotsylvania High School have had the opportunity to come away with associate's degrees from Germanna at the same time they receive their high school diplomas.

So far, 58 students have successfully completed the program. Additional students will be finishing up in 2020, the fifth year of the five-year program the gift was designed to cover.

The question is whether anyone will come forward with the funds needed to keep the program going. According to Germanna officials and based on the initial five years of the program, it will cost \$400,000 per year to sustain it. We hope someone steps up to help so the program continues to pursue its mission.

Buffett made the gift, she said in 2015, because “Too many [young people] are headed toward a life of poverty and hopelessness.” Not only does the academy allow students to pursue the academic and job skills Germanna offers, she said, they are able to do so without incurring the debt that can bog young people down as they embark on their careers.

The academy is named for Gladys P. Todd, a local civil rights activist who organized demonstrations in Fredericksburg, including lunch counter sit-ins in the 1960s. She died in January 2015 at the age of 101.

Another aspect of post-secondary education is making financing more flexible and affordable. That’s the goal of bipartisan legislation introduced by Virginia Reps. Abigail Spanberger (D–7th

District) and Rob Wittman (R–1st District). Called the Freedom to Invest in Tomorrow’s Workforce Act, the bill expands the uses allowed for 529 Savings Plan distributions to include training, certification and credentialing programs.

From their inception, 529 plans were designed to provide tax advantages for families saving for two- and four-year academic college programs and certain job training programs. Tuition for K–12 public, private and religious schools became qualified 529 expenses in the 2017 tax reform legislation.

The legislation recognizes three important facts: that learning a trade or skill is no less an investment in future success than an academic pursuit; that many jobs require technical skills that two- or four-year programs and institutions don't offer; and that many of today's workers may want to retrain later in life for a new and more lucrative line of work through continuing education.

That there is already similar legislation in the Senate bodes well for the bills to reach fruition.

State officials say that nearly half of the jobs in Virginia are of the "middle-skill" variety, defined as requiring more than a high-school diploma, but not a four-year degree. This puts an emphasis on classes offered at community colleges and technical schools.

Virginia 529 information makes the advantages clear. A parent who begins investing \$100 a month upon the birth of a child and keeps it up for 18 years will realize a nest egg of \$40,000 from the total \$21,600 investment. The gains accrued from the investment are never taxed, and Virginians can deduct up to \$4,000 per year of funds invested from their state income taxes.

Both Spanberger and Wittman tout the importance of the legislation being a bipartisan effort, and we applaud this example of working across the aisle to accomplish a very worthwhile objective. Such cooperation is the only antidote to the partisan divide that besets us.

opinion@freelancestar.com

Twitter: @FLS_Opinion

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