

January 29, 2026



## Virginia's Community Colleges and the Changing Higher Education Landscape

Senate Finance &  
Appropriations Committee

## In brief

Proportion of total enrollment that is academic transfer has declined; dual enrollment and CTE enrollment have increased.

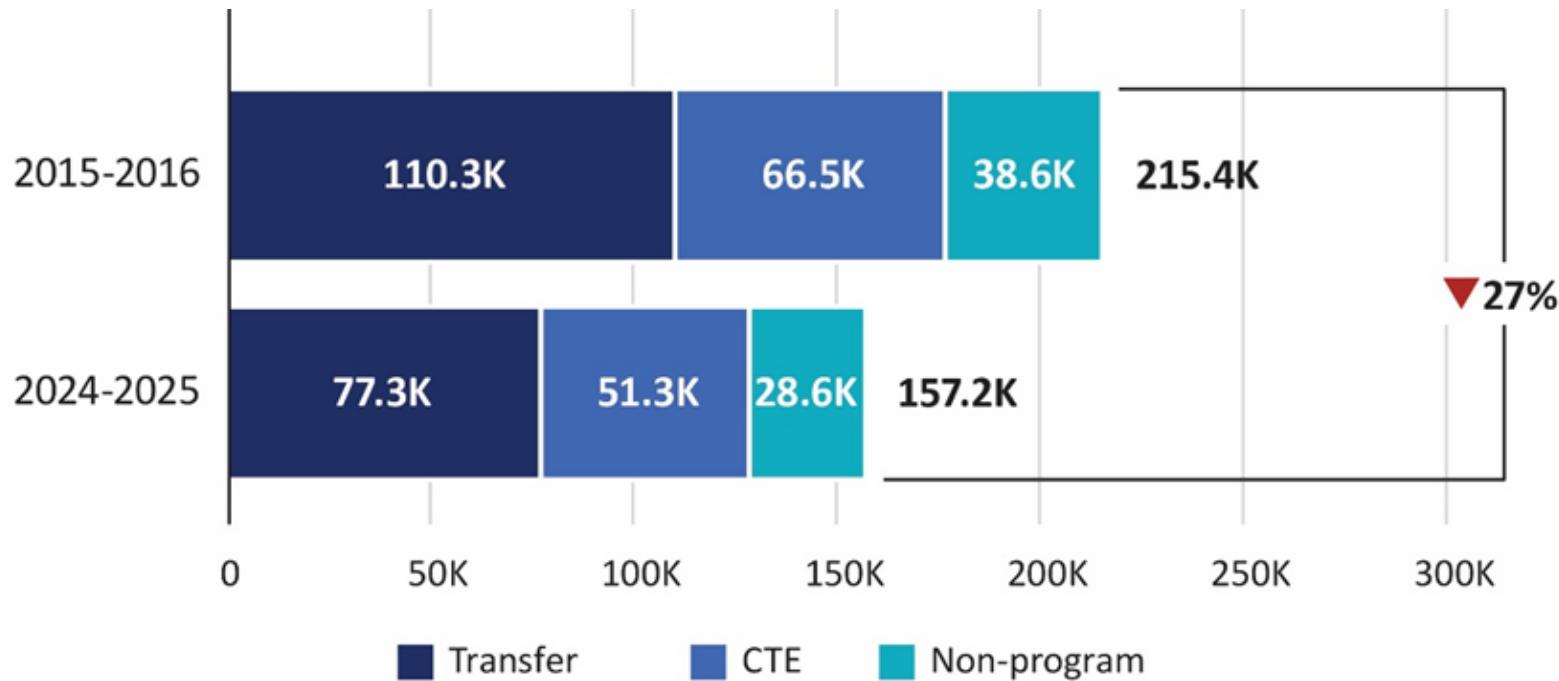
Proportion of students taking courses online has increased; those taking courses asynchronously online have been somewhat less successful.

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

About 1/3 of recent high school graduates participated in dual enrollment; very few obtained a credential.

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

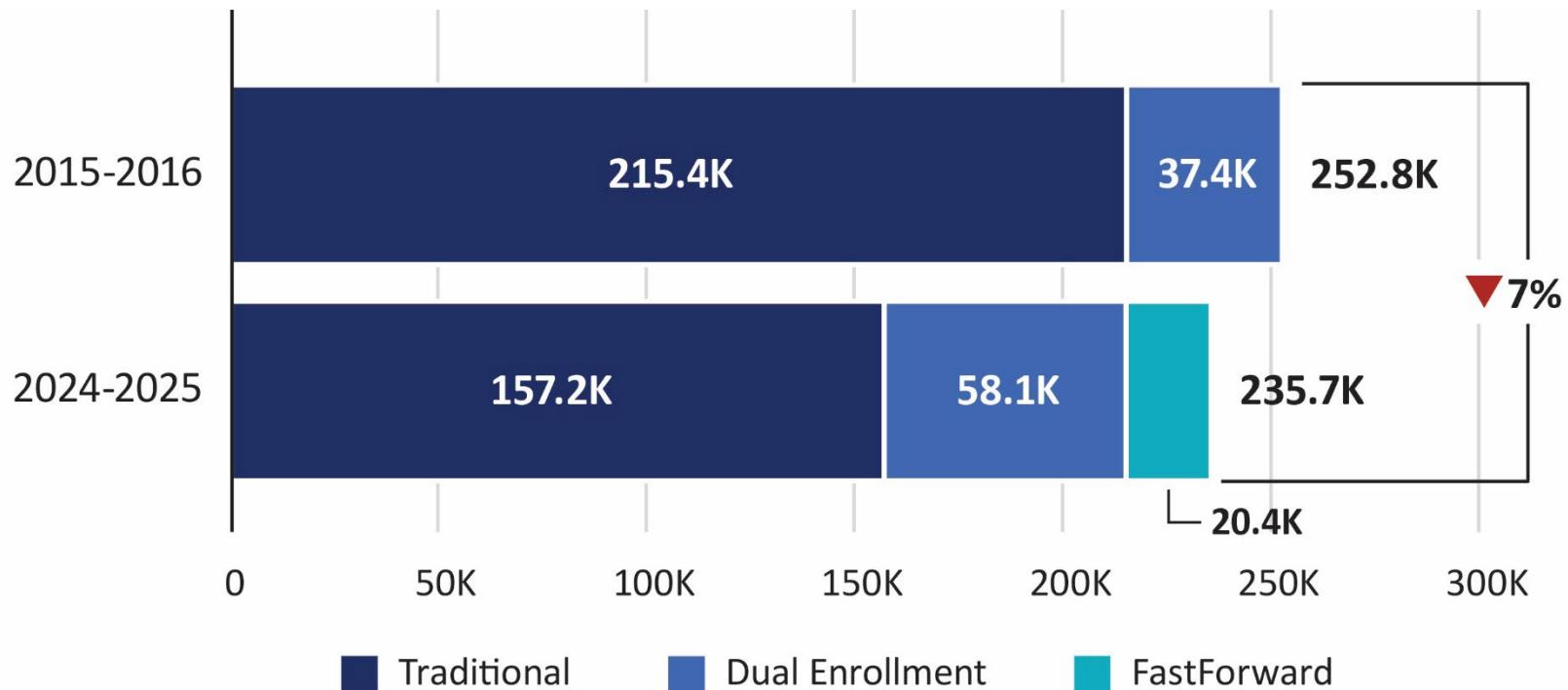
# Traditional types of VCCS student enrollment have declined



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

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# In this presentation

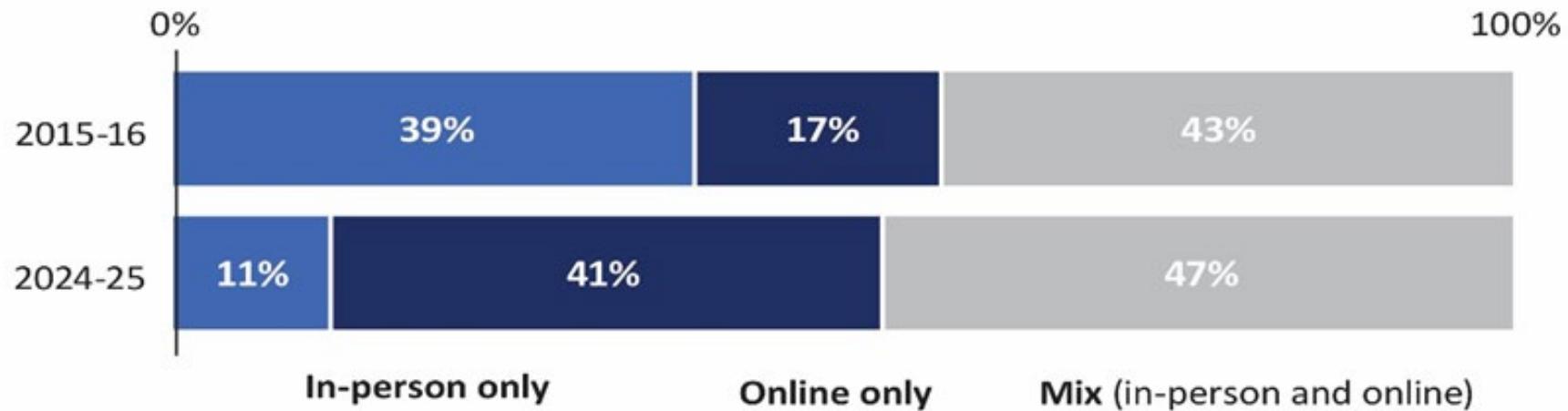
## Online learning

Career and technical education

Dual enrollment

Revenue and efficiency

# 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.

# **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% vs. 76%)
  - 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

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## 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

# 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;
- work with individual colleges to address the root causes of relatively lower student success in asynchronous courses and implement approaches that could improve success; and
- periodically evaluate the use of asynchronous online learning.

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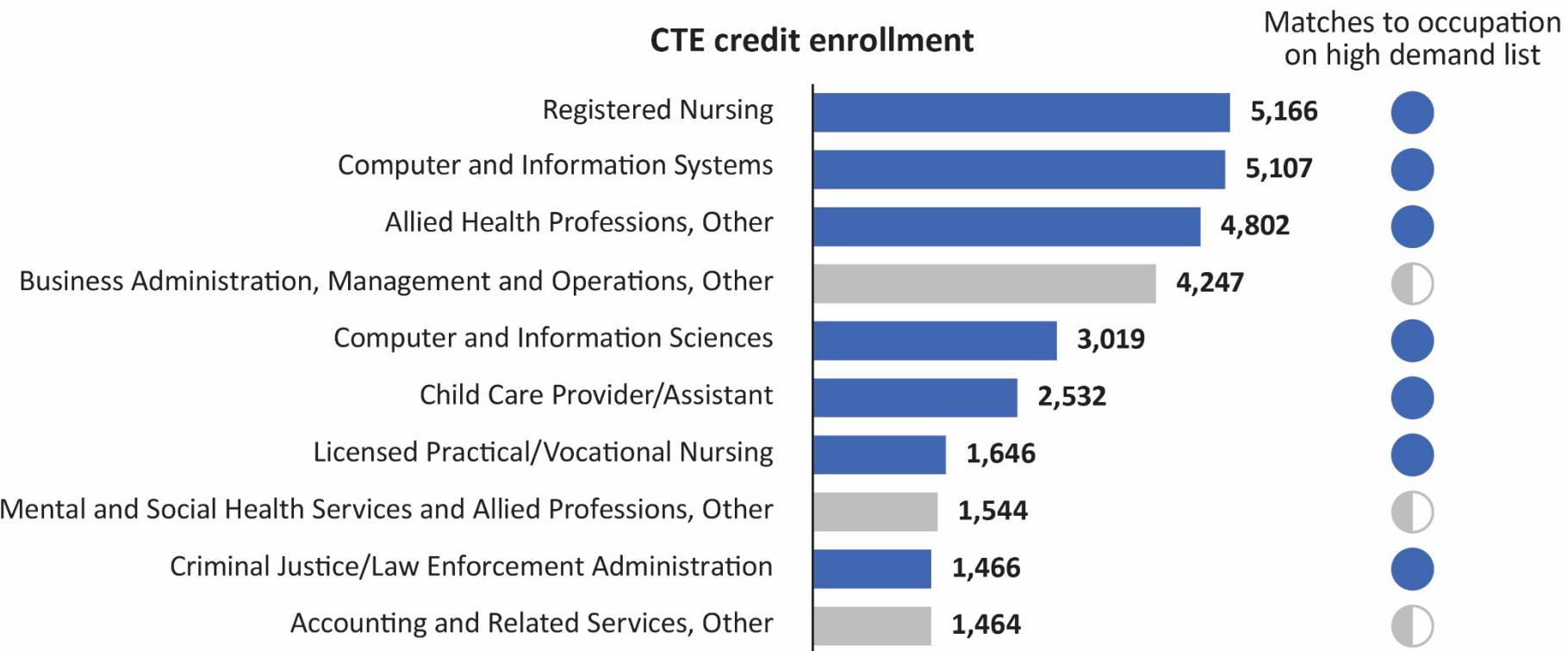
Online learning

**Career and technical education**

Dual enrollment

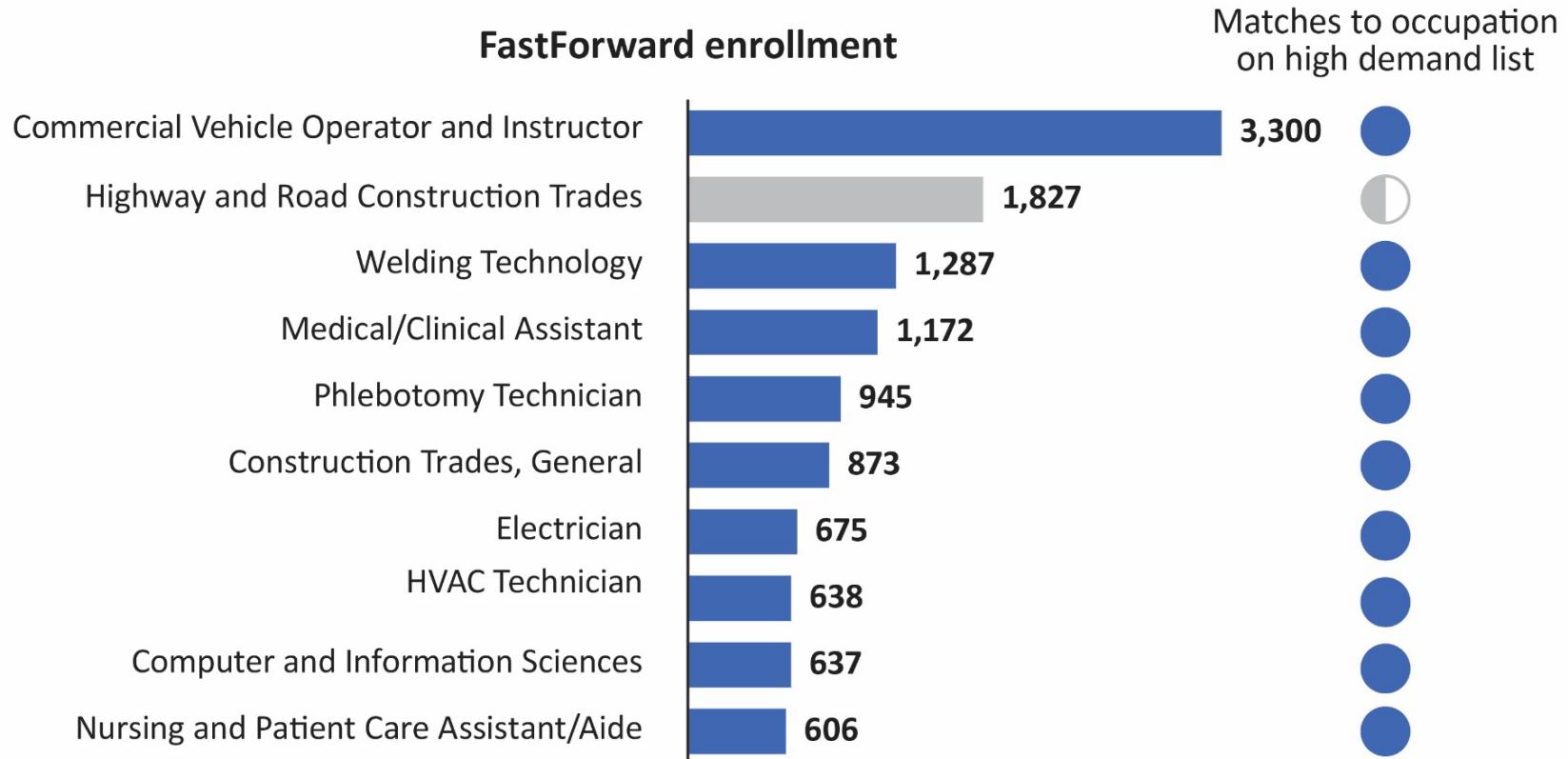
Revenue and efficiency

# Most large credit CTE programs directly match high demand occupations



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCSCS CTE enrollment.

# Most large FastForward programs directly match high demand occupations



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCSC CTE enrollment.

# 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

# 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
  - Approximately 30 programs match occupations on the state's high demand list, but have relatively low enrollment or are not widely available
- FastForward growth will plateau in short term
  - FY26 appropriation for Workforce Credential Grant\*\* (\$23.8M) was expected to run out before fiscal year end
- New federal funding may be available through “Workforce Pell”

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

# 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

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# In this presentation

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**Dual enrollment**

Revenue and efficiency

# Over 40% of dual enrollment graduates took one or two courses

Graduating dual enrollment students who took...	# students	% dual enrollment graduates	Est. % all high school graduates
<b>1 to 2 courses</b>	14,494	43%	12–15%
<b>3 to 5 courses</b>	9,997	30	8–11
<b>6 to 9 courses</b>	4,987	15	4–5
<b>10 or more courses</b>	4,026	12	3–4
<b>2024 graduates who took any dual enrollment courses</b>	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 earned a VCCS credential

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

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

# Further expansion of dual enrollment will require realistic planning

- CCRV goal is to expand access and opportunity to participate in dual enrollment
- Courses being offered tuition-free, and additional courses will be offered online
- Future increased demand for dual enrollment is unclear
- Additional effort and realistic planning is needed for effective CCRV implementation.
  - Required planning to incorporate CTE is a work in progress

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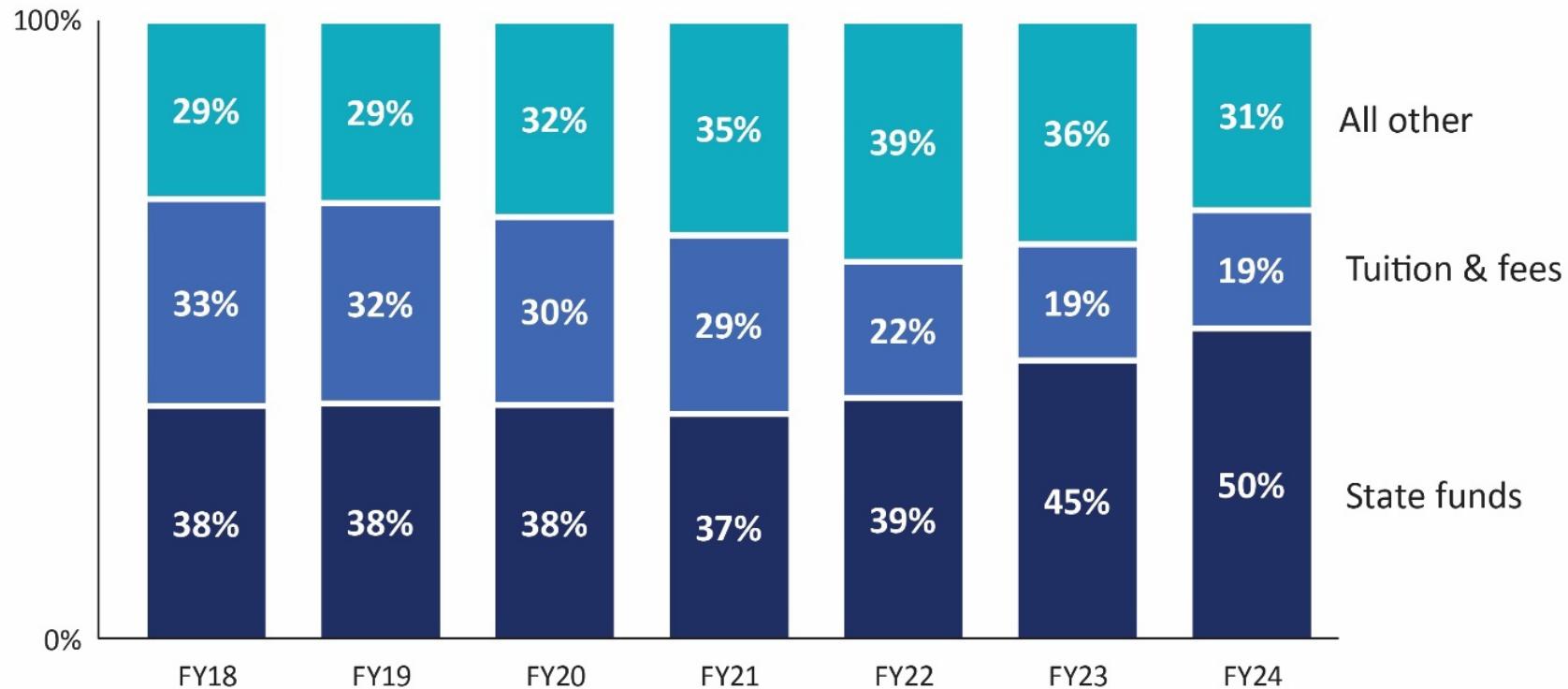
Dual enrollment

**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)
- 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.

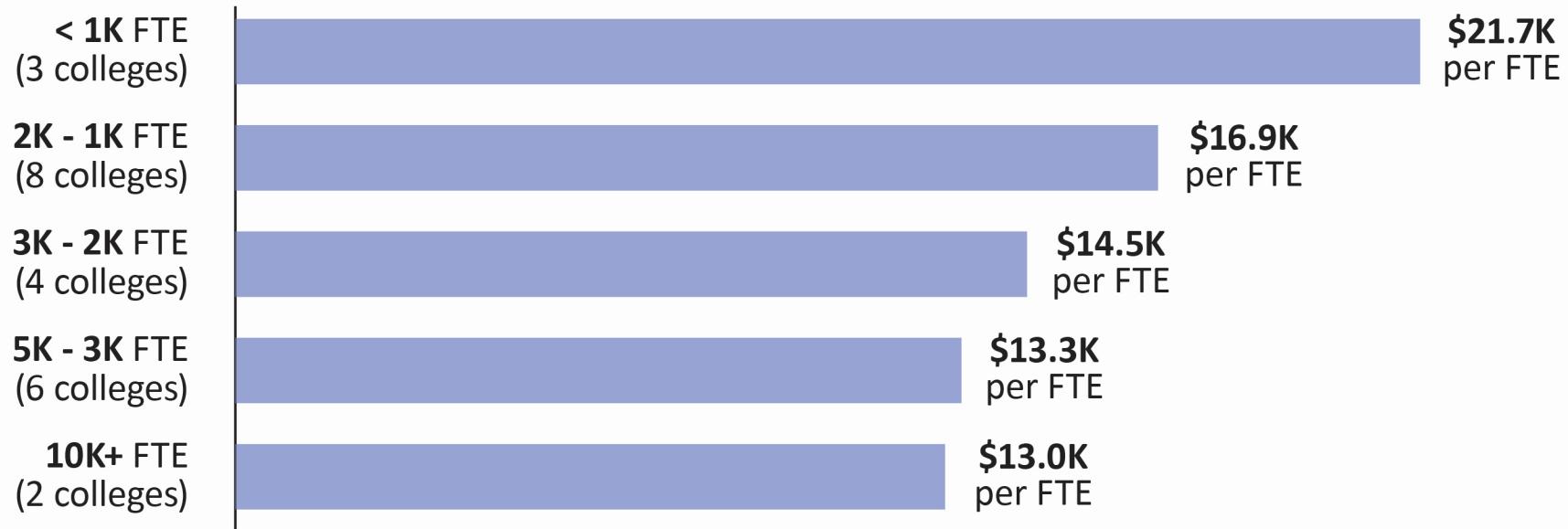
# Shift from academic transfer to CTE is affecting VCCS historical cost structure

- 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

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

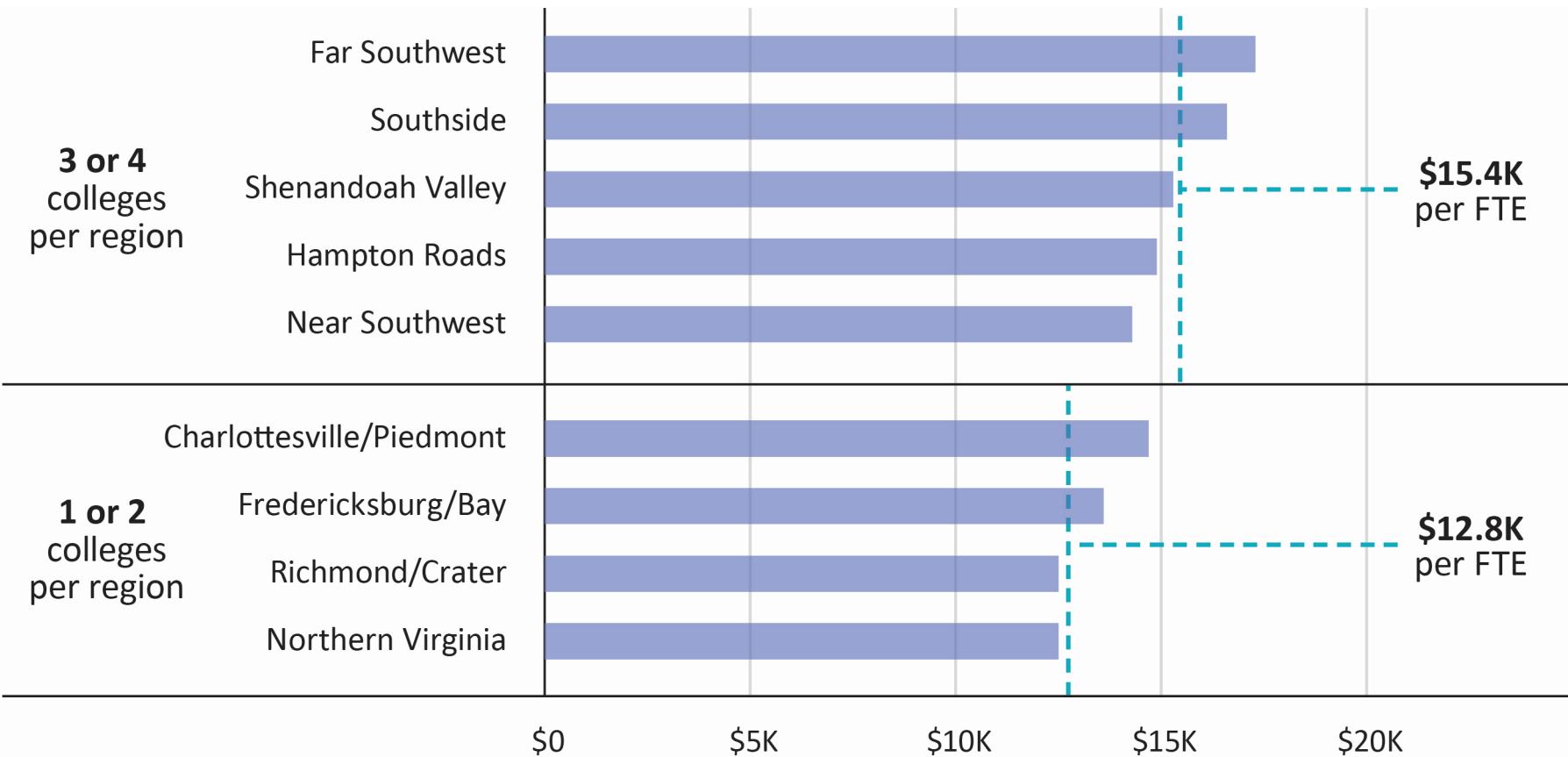
- Colleges located in rural or areas with declining population have lower enrollment
  - Colleges may be located in service areas that are losing population faster than the college is losing enrollment
- Even the smallest college has certain fixed costs (e.g., buildings, president, administrative staff, 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.

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# Questions? Comments?

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