

Putting Teacher Training on a Fast Track

Virginia Community College System / Virginia

Wylie Schwieder had many successes under his belt as a high-level corporate manager, including a role in starting up CarMax, a highly profitable used car super-store concept. But at age 49, Schwieder was looking for something more. “I want to be a teacher,” he says. “I want to help kids learn to love math as much as I do.”

Virginia Community College System’s Career Switcher program helped Schwieder transition into the classroom. “It’s easy and it makes sense,” he says. “It’s like dominoes falling into place.”

Like much of the country, Virginia suffers from a constant shortage of math, science, and foreign language teachers. The Career Switcher program operates statewide to funnel those who already hold baccalaureate degrees into jobs as teachers in these and other critical subjects. It helps them network with peers and learn critical classroom skills in a rigorous academic program while at the same time supporting them in finding employment.

Schwieder entered the Career Switcher program in January 2008, doing his coursework mostly online from his home and attending a few classes in person. In the meantime, he’s been hired at Henrico High School in Richmond, Virginia to teach Algebra II and Pre-Calculus to high school students.



After success as a high-level corporate manager, Wylie Schwieder wanted to give back. Now he’s sharing his love for solving problems as a high school math teacher in urban Richmond.

Photo by Jay Paul

at a glance

Location

Virginia Community College System, offered at 24 campuses statewide

Mission

To offer a statewide, fast-track alternative licensure program — EducateVA — that addresses critical shortages in the teaching profession.

Curriculum

Accelerated 16-week hybrid program. The 182 hours of level-

one course work are delivered through a combination of online services and periodic class sessions using compressed video at community college campuses across the state. Students then move to provisional teaching positions in the classroom while completing courses available through Saturday and online sessions.

Number of students

35 students over 50 years old have completed the fast-track

licensure program and were issued a one-year provisional license.

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Although the program specifically targets adults like Schwieder who are over 50 with valuable life experience, it is open to people of all ages with a bachelor’s degree and at least five years of work history. The program is flexible, allowing students to maintain full-time jobs while earning their credentials, but the 16-week intensive course takes 15 to 20 hours of time per week and requires significant personal commitment, says Rebecca Waters, Career Switcher program manager.

The key to success, she says, is being clear with students before orientation about meeting the prerequisites and getting the paperwork done.

“It’s about setting hard and fast deadlines for all assignments and creating a cohort model, rather than a self-paced program,” she says. “For the faculty, we are constantly prioritizing what is most important so that we don’t overload students. There is no time for extras.”

To make the program available statewide, the community college system delivers its 182 hours of coursework through a combination of online services and interactive compressed video sessions shown at community college campuses located throughout the state. Graduates receive a one-year provisional license so they can find jobs teaching while taking continued coursework on Saturdays and online. Students who complete all requirements are recommended for a five-year renewable teaching license.

“The key is building a program that doesn’t cut corners, eliminates the fluff, isn’t theoretically-based, and is a program for practitioners who have the passion and desire to give back,” Waters says.

“Working with learners over 50 is gratifying because of their enthusiasm, diverse work experience and genuine desire to teach,” Waters says. A former teacher herself, Waters describes her work in training the next set of educators as her encore career.

“I truly believe that second-career teachers are the ones who are going to change the face of public education,” says Waters, who has six grandchildren in the school system. “These are people that have valuable experience and really want to come back and make a difference.” ■

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