

UVA-Wise and Mountain Empire Community College

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the December 2021 Growth and Diversification plan presented by GO Virginia Region 1 (which includes all counties in Southwest Virginia), only 11% of the population was reported to have earned a bachelor's degree. In this economically challenged and rural part of the Commonwealth, affordable and equitable access to higher education is essential to economic turnaround. Armed with bachelor's degrees in targeted areas, such as education, nursing, business, and technology that align with career opportunities in the region, individuals who call Southwest Virginia home will be equipped with the knowledge and skills that will serve the region and their families well.

Mountain Empire Community College (MECC; founded in 1972) and the University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVA Wise; founded in 1954) have been educating the citizens of Southwest Virginia for over 50 years. With new leadership in the academic divisions of the two schools, the institutions have recently made a commitment to strengthening ties and building better bridges. Active discussions focused on ideas such as dual admissions, as well as shared recruitment and advising staff, courses, experiential learning, and campus activities are ongoing. SCHEV's call for proposals for the Collaborative Equitable-Attainment Grant comes at an opportune time when MECC and UVA Wise are working to identify the resources that would facilitate the goals to broaden access to 2-year to 4-year degree programs offered by both institutions.

Ultimately, the impact of the grant funding should encourage more high school students to earn a 4-year degree by completing foundational work in associate's degree programs at MECC and proceeding seamlessly into bachelor's degree completion at UVA Wise. To achieve this goal, the grant aims to employ data analytics to understand the facilitators and the barriers to the 2-year to 4-year programs currently offered. In particular, with the critical shortage in nurses and teachers, clear pathways to bachelor's degrees in those areas will be a primary aim of the pilot aspects of the project. In addition, access to degree completion in business and technology will be explored as the job opportunities in these areas are predicted to expand exponentially in the next 5-10 years.

The goal of the AIMS Scholar Program articulation agreement between MECC and UVA Wise is to remove barriers to attainment of a bachelor's degree for rural students by providing financial support toward the cost of attendance. For the current project, UVA Wise and MECC propose a collaboration that builds on the foundation of the current AIMS Scholars program by strengthening the pathways of success for students in rural Southwest Virginia. This project mission aligns with the Commonwealth's vision of raising education attainment to 70% (25- to 64-year olds) by 2030 as described in the SCHEV published *Pathways to Opportunity: The Virginia Plan for Higher Education*. In Wise County, the 2020 U.S. Census indicated that only 15% of adults had obtained the baccalaureate degree, verifying the importance of any efforts that UVA Wise and MECC direct toward increasing educational attainment.