



# The Virginia Career Coach Certification Program:

## A Blended Training Model for Scaling Career Coaching

### Introduction

Margaret Sproule, High School Career Coach for New River Community College at Radford High School in Southwestern Virginia, casually followed her morning routine of checking her email inbox, when one message from the VCCS Workforce Development Services perked her interest. The message was about the opportunity to enroll in a flexible, blended training program designed for Career Coaches and leading to a specialized Virginia Career Coach Certification (VCCC). As a believer in continuing education and lifelong learning, Margaret knew that having a credential to demonstrate her competencies in the field of career coaching would be beneficial. Additionally, she wanted to be a role model for her students by showing them the value of education and credentials in their potential career pathways.

With the support and encouragement of her supervisor, Margaret joined one of the first cohorts of career coaches to complete Part 1 of the VCCC state certification program. Subsequently, she completed Part 2, earning the Certified Career Services Provider certification, recognized by the National Career Development Association (NCDA) and the Global Career Development Facilitator (GCDF) through the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE).

Her story exemplifies those of many who have taken advantage of the program.

### The Virginia Career Coach Certification Program

In 2011, the United States Department of Labor (DOL) awarded Tidewater Community College a \$24 million Round 1 TAACCCT grant: Virginia RETHINKS Health Sciences Education.<sup>1</sup> One of the implementation strategies was to create a statewide certification program for Virginia's career coaches.

As a partner with Tidewater Community College, the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) launched the effort and quickly realized that this project was more than just “checking a box” for a grant deliverable. The VCCS took a creative approach to the certification program. They brought together stakeholders of the community college, secondary education, and workforce system partners to identify

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.careeronestop.org/Taacct/project-detail.aspx?projectid=79>

common competencies required of career coaches working within and across these systems in order to design a professional credential to benefit all career coaching efforts across the state. The VCCS sought the expertise of World Education’s National College Transition Network (NCTN) and the National Career Development Association for this initiative.

Celeste Hall, Career Coach and Training Specialist/Facilitating Career Development Instructor at VCCS and architect of the VCCC program, describes the program as being “master’s-level education in career development.” Many career coaches may have a bachelor’s or master’s degree in counseling, psychology or social work; however, there is no master’s degree in career coaching. As an NCDA-certified instructor, Hall understands the professional development components needed for career coaches to become certified.

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She contacted NCTN to develop the 30-hour online component because of NCTN’s track record designing and delivering online and face-to-face professional development and training with college and career navigators and coaches around the country. When Hall did a side-by-side comparison analyzing the coaching competencies established by the VCCS and existing NCTN training materials, she found that NCTN’s training addressed the majority of the targeted competencies. The VCCS engaged NCTN to adapt existing material and develop new content for the VCCS self-paced modules and assessments, drawing on the course content and featured resources. In addition to the expertise that NCTN contributes, World Education’s EdTech Center hosts the course on their Learning Management System and manages course enrollments for VCCS and partners.

This stackable certification program provides the theoretical frameworks and tools for effective practice of career coaches working for the VCCS. The certification process is divided into two parts:

- **Part 1** is a 40-hour Virginia State Certification, entailing 30 hours of online instruction, 10 hours of interactive face-to-face training, and capstone project.
- **Part 2** is an 80-hour course, completing the total 120 hours required to fulfill the Facilitating Career Development course and the certifications recognized by the National Career Development Association (NCDA) and Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE).

## Statewide Certification — Part I

### VCCS Career Coach Online Course

The 30-hour online course is made up of 10 self-paced modules designed to address the competencies needed for career coaching: promoting college and career readiness; the role of a career coach; advising

styles and approaches; career planning; self-exploration and assessment; career and education research; goal setting; supporting transitions; and essential employability skills.

Modules include video and audio clips, templates, and downloadable resources to ensure understanding and direct application of the content. Each module has concrete learning objectives and concludes with a required knowledge check to reinforce understanding. To support direct application of the concepts and resources introduced in the modules, NCTN built a “Toolbox” feature into the course, which allows coaches to collect material for the capstone project as well as act as a repository of resources they can use in real-time.



The Self-Exploration and Assessment section exemplifies one aspect of the course’s overall approach. The module prompts coaches to identify the types of information that students use in the intake and assessment process and introduces career self-assessment resources they can utilize to help guide the students for a proper career pathway fit. Coaches are then asked to complete a career self-assessment to experience the process firsthand.

Angela Lawhorne, previously the Coordinator of Career Development Center & Job Placement and currently the Director of Workforce Development at Paul D. Camp Community College, recalls, “I think the self-assessments are probably the most impactful because unless you do them yourself, you don’t know what other students or other participants are having to go through. What does it mean to be an introvert or an extrovert? Do you enjoy working with your hands? Do you enjoy working with people? This really helps when trying to nail down the perfect training program for that prospective student.”

### Face-to-Face Training

The two-day, 10-hour face-to-face interactive training, conducted by the VCCS, is the other major component of the VCCC program. Celeste Hall describes the interactive training activities as “taking theor[ies] off the paper and relat[ing] them to practice, which makes them come to life and relevant to the coaches. During these sessions, coaches dive deeper into the online course content and focus on objectives like foundational career development theory, ethics discussion, helping skills, [and] workplace trends.”

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**Culture is central to the program’s success.  
Within the halls of the VCCS, a “culture of caring” spills over.**

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Differentiated learning strategies within the online course and the face-to-face activities are invaluable for the coaches. Jennifer Wells, the VCCS Program Director for the High School Career Coach Program, notes, “Some people are auditory, some people are visual learners, and so the way that they can engage in those . . . really helps them. So, when it comes to face-to-face, they’ll have had the background knowledge and [be] ready for the hands-on practice and the real-world application of it and applying that knowledge in a safe environment.”

## Capstone Project

The capstone project provides coaches with an opportunity to reflect on and apply concepts learned, use tools and resources they've gathered in the online course modules, and apply the lessons of their face-to-face training.



*Margaret Sproule, High School Career Coach for New River Community College at Radford High School in Southwestern Virginia*

Several coaches have implemented their capstone project ideas as programs in their schools. One example is the Lee Way Bikes project. Since the area high school does not have career and technical education courses, the coach gathers some of the students who have an interest in hands-on activities, and he teaches them how to repair the bikes after school hours. Eventually, the repaired bikes are given back to the community for children who need bikes.

Another example is Margaret Sproule's job-shadowing capstone project. Margaret used her capstone to formalize experiential learning for her students. She explains, "I've had a few of them ask about job-shadows, but I didn't have anything formal in place and now we do. It also aligns with our new Registered Apprenticeship program through the Department of Labor. So, I feel like because of what I started with the job-shadowing and promoting the experiential part, the school system got on board with it too."

As of October, 2019, 375 coaches have completed the Virginia Career Coach Certification (online course modules, 10-hour face-to-face portion, and the capstone activity).

The overall response from coaches has been extremely positive, as evidenced by the following comments from post-training surveys.

About the online course:

- // As a newer coach, this content really furthered my understanding and provided me with more insight on new content and best practices and also gave me an array of information on what I can use to assist my student."
- // I'm often skeptical going into [online courses] and, unfortunately, the experience usually confirms it. However, this experience was not one of those, as I am very pleased with the content in the modules. Great job putting it together."

About the face-to-face components:

- // Good mixture of instruction and breakout activities. Great explanation of applying theory to practice through case studies. Also, I really appreciated the constant reminders that career assessment cannot be used prescriptively.”
- // Great class. I enjoyed the interaction, scenarios, and case studies. I also appreciated having more than one facilitator as it allowed us to hear different voices and perspectives.”

## National Certification — Part 2



The VCCS took a stackable credential approach to design the VCCC program. According to the Department of Labor, a credential is considered stackable when it is part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual’s qualifications and help her to move along a career pathway or up a career ladder to different and potentially higher-paying jobs.<sup>2</sup> By adding the National Career Development Association’s (NCDA) Certified Career Services Provider and the Center for Credentialing and Education’s (CCE) Global Career Development Facilitator (GCDF) certification, the VCCS career coaches have access to training to help them prepare for nationally recognized certifications. The VCCC Program is based on the 12 competency areas outlined by NCDA.<sup>3</sup> Fully aligned with the NCDA’s Facilitating Career Development curriculum, VCCS offers this training to coaches who have successfully completed the statewide certification.

From the VCCS’s perspective, stacking a nationally recognized credential onto the overall certification adds rigor, credibility, and consistency to the certification process. It shows a commitment from the system office to increase the professional development of its faculty and staff. From the coach’s perspective, the GCDF and CCSP certifications provide a national and portable credential. As Margaret Sproule affirms, “I wanted to show for myself that I could talk the talk and walk the walk, and that I was confident to do this kind of work. I feel like the GCDF is very well recognized and it is the gold standard for career development. I think that’s really what we should strive for as career coaches.”

## Sustaining and Scaling the Investment

After the first cohort of coaches completed the Part I of the training — under the Round I TAACCCT grant, which ended in 2015 — the VCCS soon realized the potential of their creation and continued to offer the VCCC program. Today the program is bigger and stronger than they could have ever envisioned and is available to coaches in a wide variety of the VCCS initiatives. High school career coaches, adult career coaches, college success coaches, Great Expectations coaches, and FastForward coaches all have access to the career coaching certification. It is only the beginning of this scalable

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<sup>2</sup> <https://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEGL15-10a2.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://ncda.org/aws/NCDA/pt/sp/facilitator\\_overview\\_competencies](https://ncda.org/aws/NCDA/pt/sp/facilitator_overview_competencies)

program for Virginia’s community colleges and partners. With hundreds of completers and counting, the certification program is now an integral part of the VCCS Career Coaching program across the state.



The program accomplished sustainability and scale through three strategies: using technology to maintain affordability; building momentum for requirement for career coaches; and aligning with Complete 2021, a six-year strategic plan for Virginia’s community colleges. In addition, partnerships, leadership, and the culture of caring are key to the program’s success.

### Using Technology to Maintain Affordability

The VCCS uses technology to keep the cost low for coaches and colleges. The VCCC online course can be done remotely and asynchronously. After the face-to-face training in Richmond, there are synchronous virtual meetings with the VCCS instructor to complete the respective component of the Virginia state certification and the Facilitating Career Development course. Each virtual meeting reduces the burden of travel and fosters cost savings for both coaches and colleges. With the online modules and face-to-face training content already built, the cost of the certificate program is kept to a minimum. Jim Andre, Director of Career Coaching and Transition Programming/Workforce Development Services at the VCCS, explains that the VCCS “offer[s] the level of training at a fraction of the cost versus what they would pay for on their own. The coaches and/or colleges only pay for the materials and travel, and the system bears the expense of the training modules and instruction, which is the main cost.”

### Building Momentum for Requirement for Career Coaches



Another major sustainability factor is that several of Virginia’s community colleges now require this certification in their career coach job description. For these colleges, new hires need to have the certification or commit to completing it in their first year. Embedding the certification this way is an example of how the VCCS works to institutionalize the original concept. With full adoption across all of the VCCS colleges, the certification is a sought-after credential for coaches, with labor market value in their system. Currently, the certification remains mostly optional for career coaches, but the number of coaches completing the certification continues to increase each year.

### Aligning with Complete 2021

Invaluable to the certification program’s sustainability is Complete 2021,<sup>4</sup> a six-year strategic plan for Virginia’s community college system. The goal of Complete 2021 is to triple the number of credentials awarded to students in Virginia. The VCCC program supports this goal with its career development focus. Jim Andre explains: “Strengthening our career coaches supports that mission directly by being,

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.vccs.edu/about/where-we-are-going/>

oftentimes, the first point of contact for folks who need career development services. Also, I think we'll see there has been increasing interest in effort directed towards serving underserved students, increasing our retention rate, particularly among first-generation, minority, Pell, Veterans, and those living in poverty or in the Asset Limited, Income Constrained, and Employed (ALICE) population. And at that cornerstone of being able to inform folks in this underserved population to this career development . . . I think it all comes back to career development.”

## Alignment with State Priorities

During a 2019 statewide meeting of academic advisors, Laura Clark, Assistant Vice Chancellor of Student Success Center & Office of Professional Development at the VCCS, shared information about the VCCC program and its learning elements. Nineteen of the 22 colleges represented asked to start the process at their institutions.

Between current career coaches and academic advisors, the VCCS intends to continue to scale the certification program and help all student-facing staff focus on holistic student supports. The 2017 Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission's Report to the Governor<sup>5</sup> highlights the importance of academic advisors, success coaches, and career coaches in improving student success and outcomes. The report recommends an expansion of proactive, individualized, and mandatory services to students. VCCS envisions the certification acting as a mechanism to support the Governor's Commission guidance on increasing the effectiveness of those services.

## Partnerships



As community colleges in Virginia adopted and disseminated the certification program among career coaches, word about the value of the training and certification spread to other Virginia state agencies and nonprofit partners. The VCCS is now offering the VCCC program to coaching staff at the Virginia Department of Social Services (DSS), Department of Corrections, Veterans Transition Assistance, and Goodwill.

DSS saw the certification's potential to help their employment services workers working with participants in the Virginia Initiative for Education and Work (VIEW) program.<sup>6</sup> During the summer of 2019, DSS made the certification mandatory for all employment services workers to add to their overall training for those employees. Karyn Thornhill, TANF/VIEW Consultant at the Virginia DSS, shares how the certification assists their DSS coaches: “The role of our DSS coaches [is] to work intensely with their customers to help them realize their potential, access their strengths, help them set their career aspirations in motion, to help them set realistic goals and tasks. The VIEW program's goal is to help our customers become self-sufficient and ultimately achieve a living wage. This certification program emphasizes education and helping our clients move forward, so it fits right within the goals of our program, which is to promote self-sufficiency through our intensive engagement with our customers.”

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<sup>5</sup> <http://jlarc.virginia.gov/2017-vccs.asp>

<sup>6</sup> <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title63.2/chapter6/section63.2-608/>

## Leadership

Institutional culture is central to the program’s success. Within the halls of the VCCS, a “culture of caring” spills over, starting from the Chancellor’s Office. From the Middle College<sup>7</sup> to Great Expectations<sup>8</sup> to the Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative,<sup>9</sup> Chancellor Dr. Glenn DuBois empowers Virginia community colleges to support students, wherever they are in life and through whatever door they decide to enter college.

Caroline Lane, Director of Coaching Programs at the VCCS, notes, “Virginia’s leading the way in a national conversation about the impact of coaching. When we evaluate student success rates and outcomes, coaching has become that critical intersection for that success. And for that reason, our chancellor’s ultimate vision is for all students to have a coach.”

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## Conclusion

When asked why the program is so important to career coaches, Celeste Hall expressed it perfectly: “Career development is really about the whole person. Some definitions of career development say it’s the constellation of roles that a person experiences throughout their lifetime. So, it’s not just about a job, it’s not just about an occupation, it’s about the whole person.”

Educators, legislators, and other stakeholders have a better understanding of the need to provide more students with wraparound support so they can move through their career pathway into jobs. From concept to scale, the Commonwealth of Virginia and the VCCS are doing their part to educate and empower career coaches, impacting thousands of students’ lives for the better.

For Margaret Sproule, the certification “helped me be a role model for continuing education. One of the things that I would like to impart to all the students that I work with is that you're not just going to stop learning after high school, or community college, or a four year. Wherever you go, it's going to be a journey. It's a lifelong thing.”

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.vccs.edu/workforce/middle-college/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://greatexpectations.vccs.edu/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.vccs.edu/giving/rural-horseshoe-initiative/>



## For More Information

### **Professional development for career coaches**

Contact Sandy Goodman, Director, National College Transition Network at World Education  
[Sandy\\_Goodman@worlded.org](mailto:Sandy_Goodman@worlded.org) and visit [collegetransition.org](http://collegetransition.org)

### **E-Learning instructional design and course hosting**

Contact Victoria Neff, Assistant Director, EdTech Center at World Education,  
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