



## **VA's Community Colleges**

### **Great Expectations Program**

Strategies utilized by an AOI National Awards Program winner to help youth pursue and complete their education goals after aging out of foster care

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## About the AOI Education Award

The Aging Out Institute (AOI) National Awards Program recognizes organizations for the work that they are doing to help foster youth age out of foster care and into independence successfully. Education is a key success factor for all youth, but because of their difficult childhood and the inherent challenges of being part of the foster care system, foster youth do not achieve educational milestones at the same rate as their non-fostered peers. In an effort to impact the poor educational statistics of foster youth, AOI celebrates and shares the strategies that are effective in helping youth earn their high school, GED, and/or higher education goals. This year, the recipient of the 2018 AOI Education Award is Virginia's Community Colleges (VCCS) for their Great Expectations program.





## About Virginia's Community Colleges Great Expectations Program

### Program Overview

The Great Expectations (GE) program is designed to even the odds for foster youth. It is named after Charles Dickens' famous nineteenth century novel of the same name that tells the story of "Pip," an orphan who eagerly abandoned his humble origins to begin a new life as a gentleman.

Established in 2008, GE provides transitional support to about 1,400 at-risk foster teens annually as they finish high school and move forward with their lives to earn a college degree. It is a successful initiative of the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education that focuses on the value of a post-secondary education as the best way to gain employment and achieve independence. It provides a coach at each college who acts as a conduit for foster youth services, and that coach becomes a caring, supportive adult who helps the student succeed. Currently, GE is offered at 21 of the 23 community colleges in Virginia.

#### GE Services Include:

- Help applying for college admission and financial aid
- Personalized counseling
- Career exploration and coaching
- Student and adult mentors
- Life skills training, including managing finances
- Individualized tutoring
- An internet-based resource center ([greatexpectations.vccs.edu](http://greatexpectations.vccs.edu))
- Emergency and incentive funds for students

To initiate a GE program, each interested community college has to submit a request and have the support of the college president. Seed money is provided with the understanding that the individual community college will provide financial support as the program develops. The project director supplies support and guidelines for the program.

## Program Structure & Roles

### *Central Office*

The central office for GE is in Richmond, Virginia. There is a Director who coordinates the program on a state level for more efficient delivery of service and advocacy. In addition to coordinating the program across the state, the central office also conducts training sessions for coaches every year and sponsors a 5-month online leadership program for students participating in GE.

### *Virginia Community Colleges*

GE is a statewide program built around its coaches who are in place at the participating Virginia Community College (VCC) campuses. Each coach has an office on campus and serves as the go-to person for foster youth. The coach meets with students one-on-one, and typically holds several group events every year for students in the program.

### *Staffing*

#### **Youth Participation Requirements:**

To be able to participate in GE, youth must meet one of the following criteria:

- Attend one of the participating Virginia community colleges
- Current foster youth
- Former foster care youth who left foster care at the age of 13 or older
- Youth who were adopted from foster care at the age of 13 or older
- Special needs youth adopted from foster care at any age

Title	Number of Positions	Details about Position
<b>Program Director</b>	1	Oversees program at the state level. Prepares budgets, assists in fundraising, negotiates at the system level, gathers data, visits colleges and coaches, presents at meetings and conferences, helps maintain website, attends meetings with other stakeholders, markets the program, maintains social media, responds to internet requests. Runs student leadership program and shares tasks with AD.
<b>GE Coach</b>	21	The coach is the single point of contact for foster youth. The coach finds the youth, helps them with housing, financial aid, career direction, course selection, counseling needs, tutoring needs, food issues, mentors, life skills training, and emergency funding. In addition, working with emotional issues is part of every coach's role. The coach listens, guides, and refers in one-on-one therapy with students. Coaches receive training in areas of trauma, career coaching, ACEs, and most have completed mental health first aid training.

## **Partnerships**

GE benefits from partnerships with organizations across the state:

**The Virginia Department of Social Service** is an active partner on the state and local level. Working with the program helps resolve many issues, including the management of Educational Training Vouchers.

**The Career Coach** program places an adult Career Coach in most of the high schools in Virginia. Their job is similar to a guidance counselor in the high school. Their focus is to help direct the student into a suitable school or career.

**Virginia Poverty Law Center** is a nonprofit organization that provides low/no cost legal advice to underserved populations. They typically hold seminars on several topics relevant to program youth including fair housing practices, renters' rights, and self-advocating.

**Voices for Virginia's Children** is a nonprofit organization that works with youth to promote changes or additions to laws to be addressed at the legislative level.

**Virginia Department of Disabilities** is a partnership that has enabled students to get needed goods and services. Many of our youth have a variety of disabilities and the coach helps them navigate toward the right support.

**Local Food Banks** serve as partners by providing food and water to homeless or food insecure youths. Snacks and non-perishables are also provided to the program's coaches on campus.

**Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act** job programs provide employment and training services that are utilized by coaches and students.

**HOPE** is Virginia's program for the education of homeless children and youth.

**The Possibility Project** is a groundbreaking, collaborative program developed by the Better Housing Coalition in partnership with Children's Home Society of Virginia.

In addition, each of the 21 college programs partner with local agencies for service projects, aid for emergency funds, mentoring, holiday celebrations, and many other youth needs.



## Staff Training/Preparation

Great Expectations staff believes in lifelong learning, starting with orientation to the community college system and specialized training that includes a training manual. New coaches are also paired with a more seasoned coach who lives in the same geographic area. They typically meet every month to discuss concerns and issues. These meetings have proven very effective in training new coaches.

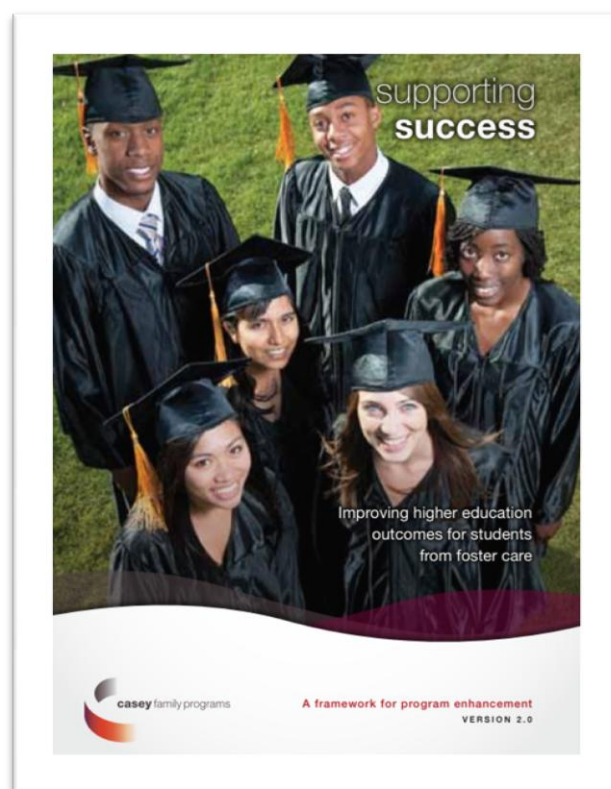
In addition, two statewide coach meetings are held each year through the central office to further professional development. Experts on pertinent topics (e.g., trauma, working with financially distressed students, mental health first aid, etc.) are also brought in for the sessions. Employees who are part of the community college system have access to these sessions at no charge.

## Research Foundation

GE was built on a foundation of research results and recommendations. Foster Care, Casey Family Programs (Emerson & Bassett, 2010), identified six core elements needed for programs developed to help foster youth navigate higher education. The GE program incorporates all of these elements in its program design, as outlined below.

**1. Designated leadership:** A trusted staff person whose primary responsibility is assisting the youth through guidance. GE provides a coach on each community college campus to be the go-to person for the student. Each coach establishes a caring relationship with the student to assist him or her in obtaining a postsecondary credential for a living wage. The coach provides many case management services to the student including help with career selection, course selection, counseling, and emergency funds.

**2. Internal and external champions:** Additional supporters both within and outside of the college. The coach connects the student with other school personnel to develop a network of staff that can assist the student. The coach also helps the student to know what is available in the community and how to advocate for him or herself.



**3. Collaboration with community agencies:** Programs should have strong connections with social service agencies, independent living providers, and other local and state service providers. The coach is an advocate in the community for the student. They know the social workers, independent living coordinators, school personnel, and many other service providers available to the student.

**4. Data-driven decision making:** Individual and programmatic decisions should be based on data. Great Expectations collects program data on a quarterly basis including measures of students served, student persistence, and credential attainment.

**5. Staff peer support and professional development:** Program staff benefit from a network of peers. To promote staff peer support and professional development several different methods are in place. All-coach meetings are held twice a year to discuss pertinent topics and share ideas. Experts are brought in to educate and further train staff. Topics like understanding poverty and trauma-informed care are examples. In addition, the state is divided into four cohorts, based on geography. The cohorts meet every other month for lunch to discuss issues and concerns. This has been a very successful meeting to support each coach. Also, the director and assistant director travel to each college to meet with the coach at their school. This builds a stronger relationship between the coaches and central office staff.

**6. Sustainability planning:** Planning should take place to sustain the program. The GE program has gone through two strategic planning processes, the most recent in 2015. The 2015 plan outlines goals and objectives in the areas of sustainability, recruitment, data collection, retention, and student success. Casey (2010) identified three additional elements for programs to support foster youth through postsecondary education that are related to direct student services. These include:

- (1) Assistance with year-round housing and other basic needs (There is no housing available through the community college system; therefore, GE coaches spend many hours helping students find housing.)
- (2) Financial aid (Coaches are able to secure financial aid for their students and the coach is able to provide academic and career counseling.)
- (3) Academic advising, career counseling, and supplemental support (Many GE coaches have completed, or are currently enrolled in, the global career coach certification program.)

Finally, Casey (2010) added elements related to direct student support. These include personal guidance, counseling, and access to mental and general health services; opportunities for community engagement and leadership, and lastly, planned transition between colleges and employment.

Great Expectations coaches incorporate all of these elements into their student support. Although many coaches have a counseling background, professional ethics do not allow for them to provide counseling services as part of their coaching role. However, most are trained in mental health first aid and will make referrals to area providers of counseling services. In the leadership arena, Great Expectations established a statewide youth leadership program that is now in its fourth year.

About a dozen young people from all over the state take part in an online class, utilizing social media and the Blackboard system during the spring semester. In a final in-person two-day session, leaders meet each other for the first time, engage in additional leadership and team building activities and present advocacy projects to a larger audience at a graduation celebration honoring students from all GE programs who earned credentials that year.

Coaches also work with their students to apply to four-year colleges and universities, and enter the job market. Some programs provide job shadowing experiences and all coaches offer to continue working with their students throughout their university experiences, an offer of which many students take advantage.





## The Student Experience

### *Knowledge/Skills*

GE offers many opportunities for youth to gain knowledge and build skills. Below are several examples:

**Leadership Skills:** GE builds leadership in several ways including a five month statewide online Leadership Program. Selected applicants work together using the Blackboard system and a private Facebook page. The leadership coordinator reviews each assignment submitted and stays in contact with each student during the course. Part of the course is an advocacy project where each student selects a topic of interest to them and submits it for review. The projects are then presented at the graduation luncheon in May. Other leadership activities include training in public speaking to groups interested in foster youth, attending workshops on leadership, and individual coaching by staff and coaches.

**Problem Solving & Decision Making:** Many foster youth and former foster youth have had most decisions made for them. On a daily basis, students are taught problem solving in real time by their coach, who helps them deal with and make decisions about issues that arise like falling grades or problems at home.

**Finances:** Many of students have little exposure to financial skills, so the coach provides this training through workshops that simulate real life situations and how to handle them in "The Reality Store" program.

**Table Manners:** The coach helps provide sessions dealing with skills like table manners and then has the youth put them to use in a more formal restaurant setting.

### **Learning Balance:**

Active Learning = 80%

Passive Learning = 20%

**Sexuality and Relationships:** Healthy relationships and safe sexual behavior are discussed through a partnership with Planned Parenthood.

**Goal Setting:** All coaches work with short and long-term goal setting, an area many foster youth are not familiar with.

**Handling Failure:** Part of the coach's role is helping foster youth handle failure and grow from it.

**Self-Control:** As emerging adults, many of our students lack self-control. Ongoing coaching helps students learn and practice this valuable life skill.

**Educational Field Trips:** The coach will take students on field trips, including graduation celebrations held in a different part of the state. The coach may combine this trip with educational activities. Virginia has a rich past allowing coaches to integrate history with travel. For example, over half of GE coaches took students to President Obama's second inauguration in Washington, D.C. The students have also met political leaders and toured government buildings. Many youths from the program have had the opportunity to speak with lawmakers and stakeholders to help them understand the conditions of foster care.

### *Characteristics/Attitudes*

Along with knowledge and skills, the activities that students engage in as part of the GE program helps to build personal character and positive attitudes. Below are a few examples:

**Confidence:** Students are treated with respect and positive regard, as coaches understand trauma and its effects. This support and belief that the student can succeed helps build the student's confidence.

**Creativity:** Coaches and staff are trained to be aware of special talents or skills a student may have. Any creative effort is reinforced and encouraged.

**Integrity:** Coaches teach integrity – the desire to make choices based on strong principles and values – through role modeling and reinforcing ethical decisions made by students.

**Optimism:** Hope and optimism are common traits among the coaches. As the title of the program indicates, GE does have GE for our youth and the coaches share their faith in the students' futures while helping them set and achieve goals.

**Perseverance:** By building a relationship with the students, the coach gives them the courage to continue even when things get difficult. Both verbal and occasional monetary reinforcements are used to help motivate youth to keep trying.

**Resilience:** The coach reinforces positive signs of resilience (being able to recover quickly from challenges) and helps students recognize this ability in themselves.

**Self-Reliance:** In many cases, foster youth often have had only themselves to rely on. While in the care of others, other people may make all decisions. The coach helps the students learn to navigate self-advocacy and problem solving so that they can learn how to rely on themselves.



## Funding

Funder	Annual Amount	Purpose
<b>Virginia Foundation for Community College Education</b>	\$500,023	The Virginia Foundation is a nonprofit organization that primarily funds GE for Community College Education, and securing financial support is an ongoing process. This foundation supplies the funds to support the program at the colleges, as well as system office expenses.
<b>Virginia's Community Colleges - System Office</b>	\$80,000	System office expenses are covered by the state.
<b>Virginia's Community Colleges</b>	\$1,245,596	This funding goes to support (in part) the coaches' development, training, travel, outreach, salaries, and benefits. Also, it covers student services, including supplies, activities, testing fees, transportation, and scholarships.
<b>Donors</b>	Varies	Emergency funds provided by donors can be used for anything that prevents a student from attending class. This includes car repairs, books, uniforms, supplies, rent, and food. This funding has kept many students in school.

## Marketing

Marketing is an ongoing process facilitated through the program's website and reinforced through social media accounts. Each coach works within their locality to promote the program with high schools, local DSS and any organization that works with foster youth. GE produces videos, handouts and rack cards. Many of the schools also use coffee mugs, pencils and other items for promotion and marketing. The state office staff and coaches speak at civic and foundation meetings locally and nationally. State office employees and coaches present at conferences locally, statewide and nationally.

The coach connects with prospective students through social workers, career coaches, guidance counselors, Independent Living Coordinators, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) program, and through student self-referral.

## Measures of Youth Success

### *During Program*

Several tools are used to track student progress. Each coach keeps data on each student, including information such as name, ID number, date of birth, when they began the program, current status, and notes on each student. Each coach reports this data to the central office. Each college records credentials earned quarterly and yearly.

### *After Program*

The Virginia Community College (VCCS) keeps longitudinal data also and can track students to jobs and beyond. The program stays in contact with our former student leaders through the private Facebook pages and engages in discussions about their success and the impact the program has had on them. Coaches also keep in touch with former students and share information about their success with system office staff.

### *Graduates Since 2008*

- A total of 396 Virginia's Community Colleges (VCCS) credentials have been awarded to GE students. This is a duplicated total since a number of students earned multiple VCCS credentials. 285 unique students earned these credentials since 2008.
- Students who earned a Complete 2021 industry credential since 2015, as the result of either credit or noncredit coursework at a community college. A duplicated total of 159 industry credentials was awarded to GE students. 122 unique students earned these credentials during this timeframe.
- Two-Year Transfers – 61 unique students enrolled at a two-year college after VCCS. There were no duplicates.
- Four-Year Transfers – 284 unique students enrolled at a four-year college/university after VCCS.
- Two-Year College Graduates – 5 students earned external two-year degrees.
- Four-Year College Graduates – 42 GE students graduated from a four-year college/university



## Continual Program Improvement

GE continually adjusts its program to align with changing needs. Initially, grants and the college central office funded GE. It is difficult to maintain sustained funding, so GE has adapted creatively while expanding the donor base.

Programmatically, GE has gone through changes in expanding its curriculum to include more workforce credentials. The program has also expanded access from five pilot schools to 21 of 23 colleges. With this expansion, GE has more coaches reaching more students. GE has also implemented a formal MOU process with the colleges and collects data on performance measures on a quarterly basis.

## Challenges

GE's youth face two major challenges, housing and transportation. The community colleges do not provide housing, so each coach needs to be familiar with the community to assist youth with housing difficulties. Safe, low-income housing is an issue in Virginia.

Rural Virginia has little to no public transportation. Many of our students walk to school or catch a ride with another student. Coaches have been creative in helping students with transportation. Where there is public transportation, passes are provided as incentives, as well as gas cards. Where no transportation is available, car pools have been used.

## Lessons Learned

Many lessons have been learned since the program began. Below are a few that may help others trying to implement the GE strategies:

***Having the coach as a constant is very important as the students often have personal setbacks.***

Many of our youths' paths to a credential are not straight. However, because they know the GE coach is there, most of them succeed.

***Coaches must also feel supported in their work.***

Visits, phone calls, emails, cohort meetings, and coach meetings are all ways to help coaches feel supported. Continual training for coaches is important. The coaches are eager to learn new ways of helping students.

***Emergency funds are critical to student completion.***

A flat tire could make a student miss a test and drop out because they have no resources to repair the tire.

***Achieving a level of stable funding is key.***

As the program grew from 5 colleges to 21, resources have thinned. The individual colleges are reluctant to support the program solely from their budgets.

***The GE program is seeing a trend of older foster youth coming into the program or returning more ready to learn and plan for a career.***

Youth at 18 may not be ready to plan a career and therefore flounder for a while. Others need to “bottom out” to learn the need for more education and training. The student needs to be ready to get the most out of GE.



*L-R: Jennifer Roark, Southwest VA Community College (SWCC) GE Coach; Amber Fuller, SWCC GE Student; Andrea Keen, SWCC GE Student; Emily Terry, VHCC Great Expectations Student; Deborah Ledford, VA Highlands Community College (VHCC) Great Expectations Coach; Rachel Mayes Strawn, GE Program Director*



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**Dr. Linda Schmidt**  
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**The Education category sponsor that took a chance on a new awards program because they saw the need to come together to help foster youth who are aging out of care:**



<https://teamapproach.com/>

**And a special thank you to all the organization representatives who took the time to fill out an award application and let us know about the great work they are doing!**





**MISSION:** AOI promotes resources and strategies that help youth age out of foster care and into adulthood successfully.

**VISION:** To improve national outcomes for youth aging out of care by identifying, sharing and encouraging the widespread use of effective strategies for helping foster youth transition to adulthood.

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