2025 VIRGINIA COURSE MATERIALS SURVEY

Student Experience with Inclusive Access

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2025 Virginia Course Materials Survey: Student Experience with Inclusive Access

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Introduction

One goal of the 2025 Virginia Course Materials Survey was to investigate the use of access codes for course materials included with tuition or student fees. These codes are often referred to as Day One, First Day, Inclusive Access (IA), or Equitable Access programs. Commercial publishers typically provide digital access to all students in a class or program on a subscription basis, usually for the duration of the course. Many schools have adopted these programs, believing they will reduce costs and ensure access for all students.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How aware are students of access code programs?

2. What proportion of those aware of access code programs are also aware of the associated opt-out options?

3. What proportion of those who have used access code programs know the cost to them of the program?

4. What do students who have used access code programs say about their experiences?

The main goal of the research was to examine students' perspectives on the impact, if any, of introducing such programs. An important caveat to consider when interpreting these results is that access code programs are relatively new, sometimes implemented on a department rather than institutional level, and the student experience may be limited and vary widely between institutions. For example, it is less common for a student to have used access codes for all their courses; more often, these may be used in one or two courses. It is also important to note that the research did not analyze the details of each institution's access code implementation or the specifics of each student's experience. We do not know, for example, how many semesters or how many courses a particular student's access code experience covered. All comparisons are between students with no experience and those with any level of experience with an access code program.

Key Findings

How aware are students of access code programs?

- Most students (66%) are unaware of access code programs.
- A smaller number (12%) know about the programs but haven't used them.
- 22% of student respondents have used an access code program.

What proportion of those aware of access code programs are also aware of the associated opt-out options?

- Among those aware of or using such programs, a third (33%) are aware of opt-out options.

What proportion of those who have used access code programs know the cost to them of the program?

- Forty-two percent of students using access code programs have a general idea of costs, and 24% know the exact amount.

What do students who have used access code programs have to say about their experiences?

- Open-ended student responses reveal mixed views on access code programs, with negative comments outnumbering positive ones two to one.
- Students voice concerns about cost, transparency, non-functioning codes, loss of access to materials after the course ends, and limited flexibility.
- Students also expressed a desire for clearer information about costs and more options to opt out or select cheaper alternatives.

Access Codes and Inclusive Access Programs

The 2021 Virginia Course Materials Survey did not include questions specifically about access code programs or Inclusive Access (IA) models. However, students mentioned access codes so frequently in their open-ended responses that they were coded as a separate theme in the qualitative analysis. The landscape has changed significantly since then, and students now encounter both traditional access codes and Inclusive Access programs with similar mechanisms. With that in mind, the 2025 survey added questions addressing this topic. Since there is no single definition of these programs and institutions often use campus-specific branding, the 2025 survey provided the following explanation to student respondents.

> "Are you familiar with programs that provide course materials available through access codes that are bundled in with tuition or student fees? These are often called Day One, First Day, Inclusive Access, or Equitable Access programs. They are most commonly provided by commercial publishers to provide digital access to all students in a class or program on a subscription basis (typically for the duration of the course)."

The most common of these programs is typically referred to as "Inclusive Access." The website inclusiveaccess.org defines such programs as follows:

> "Inclusive Access is a textbook sales model that adds the cost of digital course content into students' tuition and fees. Inclusive Access programs usually start with an agreement between an institution, a bookstore, and one or more publishers. On or before the first day of class, digital content is delivered to students, typically through a learning management system. Students have a period to "opt out" before they are automatically billed for the cost. After the course, students typically lose access to the content. Inclusive Access is also known as automatic textbook billing, and the details of each program can vary by campus."
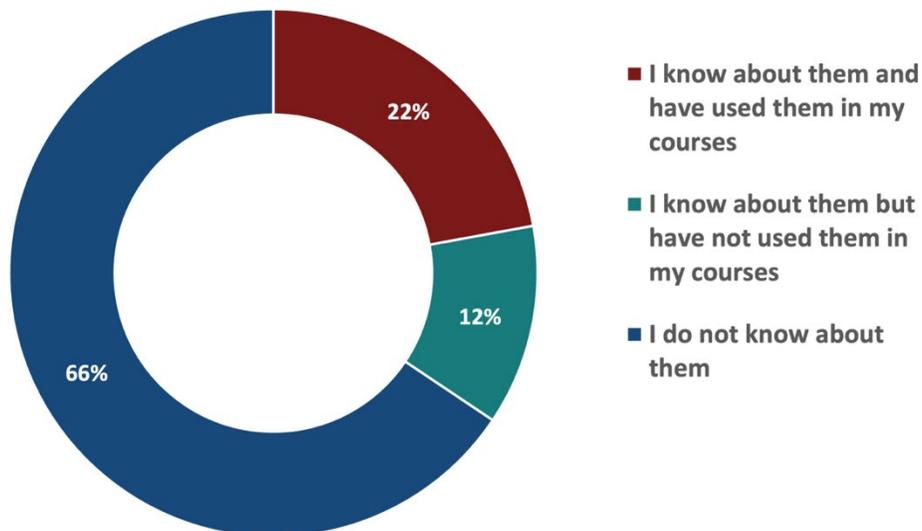
Respondents for the 2025 survey were asked about their awareness of such programs. All students who reported being aware were asked whether they knew about the opt-out policy for these programs. With the above explanation in mind, they were also asked a general open-ended question to "share any thoughts on your experiences with the use of access codes." Students participating in these programs were also asked if they were aware of the costs and how they preferred to pay.

Awareness of Inclusive Access Programs

Inclusive Access programs are not widely known among Virginia students. Approximately two-thirds of all students are unaware of these programs, while 22% report being aware of them and having used them in their courses. An additional 12% say they are aware of the programs but have never used them (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Students' level of familiarity with access code programs for course materials

Are you familiar with programs that provide course materials available through access codes that are bundled in with tuition or student fees?

- 22% — I know about them and have used them in my courses
- 12% — I know about them but have not used them in my courses
- 66% — I do not know about them

Student Experiences

Students who reported being aware of Inclusive Access programs were then asked a series of follow-up questions. Note that these responses do not represent the general student population, but only those who were aware of (966 students) or using (1,845 students) such programs.

Opt-out Options

Among students who were aware of or used Inclusive Access programs, one-third were aware of any opt-out options associated with them (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Students' awareness of opt-out policies for access code programs

Were you aware of the opt-out policy associated with course materials using access codes?
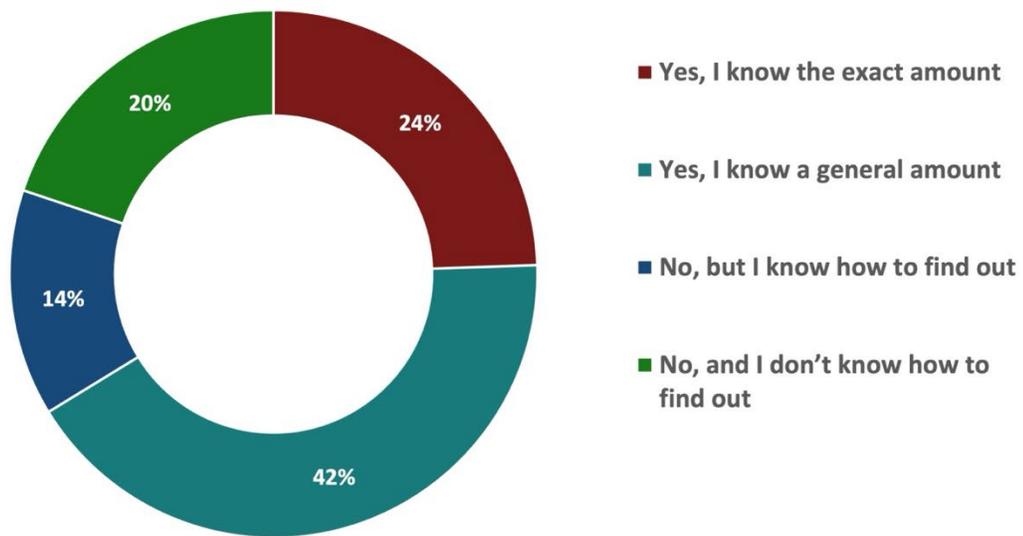

- Yes
- No

33%

67%
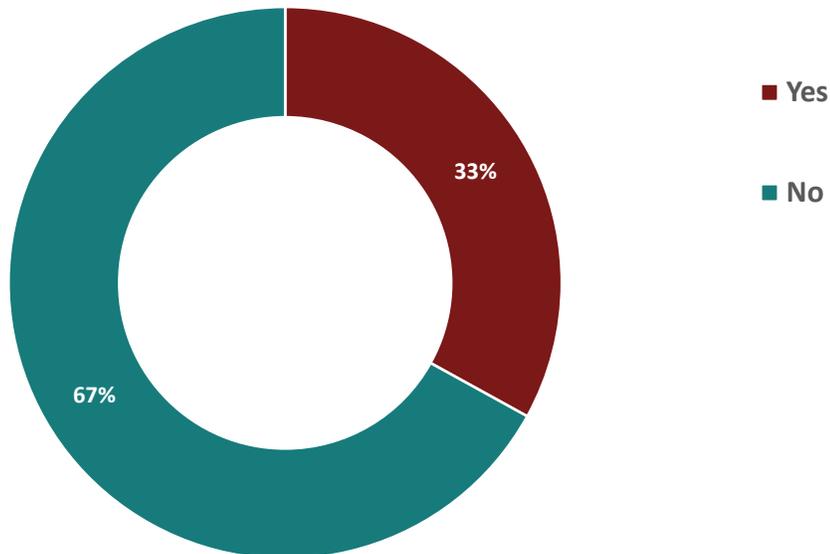
Cost Awareness

Most students who used access code programs had at least a general idea of their costs (42%) or knew the exact costs (24%). A smaller group (14%) was unaware of the costs but believed they could find out. One in five students using access code programs did not know the cost or how to find out (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Students' awareness of the costs of access code programs
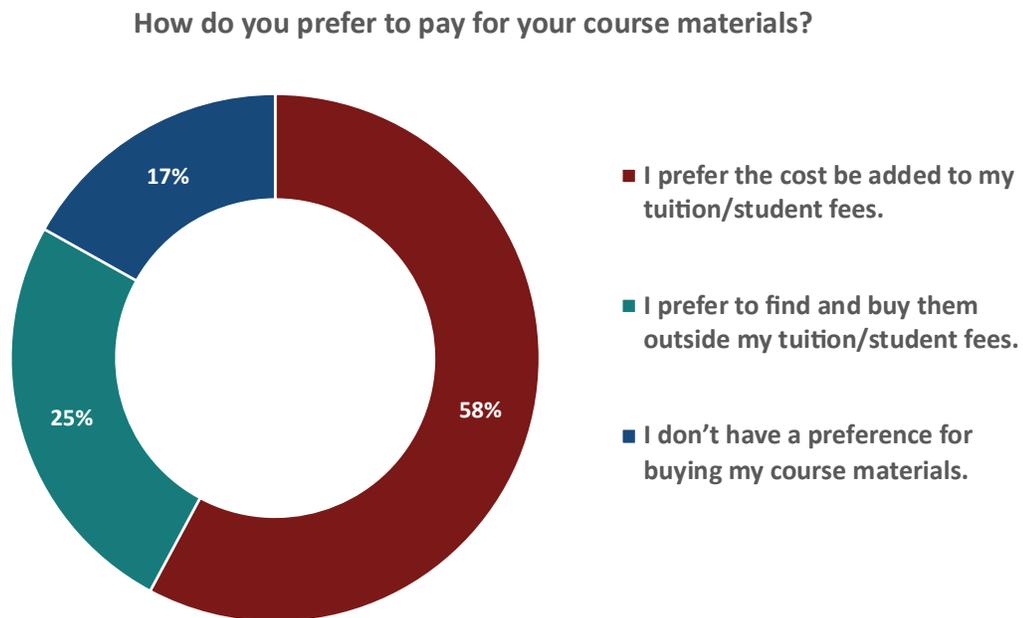
For your courses that use access codes, are you aware of the required costs?

- Yes, I know the exact amount
- Yes, I know a general amount
- No, but I know how to find out
- No, and I don't know how to find out

Payment Preferences

Students who reported using access codes were asked how they preferred to pay for them. The majority (58%) said they preferred to have them added to their tuition or student fees, while one-quarter (25%) preferred paying separately from tuition or fees, with only 17% indicating no preference. It is important to note that the question and answers specifically relate to students' opinions about paying for access codes, not for course materials in general (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Preferences for payment methods among users of access code programs

How do you prefer to pay for your course materials?

- ■ **I prefer the cost be added to my tuition/student fees.**

- ■ **I prefer to find and buy them outside my tuition/student fees.**

- ■ **I don't have a preference for buying my course materials.**

Open-ended Responses

To gather student opinions and experiences with bundled course material access programs (e.g., Inclusive Access programs), the survey included an optional open-ended question with the prompt: "Please share any thoughts on your experiences with the use of access codes that are bundled with tuition or student fees for your courses." Of the 1,845 respondents who reported using an Inclusive Access program, 680 (37%) provided an open-ended response.

The respondents expressed varying views on their experiences with having these programs included with tuition or student fees. Overall, the main concerns focused on cost, transparency, and flexibility. While many student comments mentioned that these programs were useful, there were twice as many negative responses as positive. The negative feedback covered various aspects of the programs, highlighting major concerns about cost, transparency, non-functioning codes, and the lack of flexibility with these programs. Comments also expressed frustration over the lack of clear information about what students are paying for and called for greater flexibility to opt out or choose cheaper options.

Benefits

Several respondents acknowledged the benefits of bundled course material access programs and access codes, as they provided useful additional materials or were tied to assignments in a way that enhanced their learning experience.

"I appreciate when they are bundled or just included in a class, it ensures everyone has the same material and simplifies the process and is overall less stressful."

"If a class requires an access code to have additional material, then I find it beneficial."

"Access codes are useful for personalizing these texts and materials to each student."

"I used them a lot with my online classes and find it a lot easier to access and have whenever I need them for studying and doing assignments and homework."

Indifference and Practicality

Some respondents viewed bundled access pragmatically, as a way to simplify course logistics, despite potential added costs.

"I don't care either way really. I assume they make the class about the same cost whether we buy separately or its integrated."

"It is hard to gauge, it really depends on the class."

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Cost Concerns

Many respondents expressed concerns about the high costs associated with Inclusive Access programs and access codes, often feeling that these are unjustly integrated into tuition fees without providing clear value. Several noted that the price is disproportionately high compared to alternative options like renting.

"All the bundled costs is doing is making sure to charge the students full price from the university bookstore. You are now unable to find used or third-party resources and are forced to spend more money than you would have. Horrible behavior."

"I do not like them. Because students are savvy enough to find discounts/cheaper options on their own, I think it actually just costs students more and just raises their tuition often without actually helping them to afford books. The only way I see this being effective is with the ability to opt out being not only made available but made accessible to students who do not want to pay this cost."

"A lot of times these cost students and we aren't informed until we are in the class and then it gets added to our tuition and is almost a hundred dollars per class."

"Access codes are more expensive in the bookstore. They were looking to charge me a $13+ fee for simply using the bookstore as a medium. Instead, I had to pay out of pocket online."

"Bundled access codes are only effective if the cost is less than it would be on average to get used materials and if the students can opt out of the cost if they choose to purchase materials instead."

"I have found the day one access to not be very useful and often an unpleasant surprise on my billing statement and have opted out of it. I prefer to have a choice as to if or when I will purchase my course materials and haven't had trouble finding materials for the same price as the day one charge at a later date."

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Access and Usability Issues

There were complaints about difficulties accessing and using these codes, such as system issues during entry, codes for incorrect editions, or codes that did not work on day one.

"I really don't like the use of access codes bundled with tuition or student fees. I had to pay because there was no other option but the digital access code. I don't even get to own the book—it's just a temporary lease. On top of that, it's really inconvenient to navigate or search through the digital version compared to a physical book."

"This semester, the access codes that were bundled into tuition fees did not work for nearly the first month of the semester. Professors were flexible with assignment due dates because of this, but I ended up just opting out of the included access codes and purchasing them on my own to make sure I could get my work done. It was a bit more expensive for me to buy them on my own instead of through the school, but it gave me peace of mind that I'd be able to progress through my classes without delay."

"I had a code that did not work one time and I was unable to access my course material."

"I have been able to follow the instructions, but I do wish they were a little more user friendly."

"I have had multiple codes that I have purchased from my bookstore actually end up being for the wrong edition or book that my instructor had wanted and have had to go through publishers to get it corrected."

"I like the concept, but the execution has been frustrating- I'm almost halfway through my 2nd 8-weeks course, and still can't access the material!"

Expiring Codes

There were multiple complaints about the expiration of the material course codes. These issues can be especially problematic for those re-taking a course or otherwise needing the material later.

"I also think these things are kind of a rip-off, requiring students to purchase electronic access that is then cut off at the end of the semester. If we are really learning, wouldn't students want to refer back to seminal texts for future capstones or research in their major?"

"I can't stand access code course materials because once the course is over you can never access the resource again. And the resource is often highly specific to the course and not very applicable to real life application of knowledge."

"I do not like using access code material as they expire by a certain date in case you need to retake the course over you will not be able to use the same material. The coded material is difficult to access at first and leads you to getting further behind in the course when you first start the assignments that are associated with the coded material."

"I don't appreciate the time limits on material access codes. They are expensive but expire with the class, leaving you no option but to purchase if you need to access the material again for any reason (comprehensive exams at the end of a program or needing to retake a class)."

Lack of Awareness and Information

Some respondents were not clearly informed about access codes or other options available, leading to frustration over unexpected costs or being unable to choose alternatives.

"I wish the university were more transparent about what they are charging fees for instead of just "academic fee" or some other vague and unhelpful label."

"Was never made aware of other options."

"Was not clearly informed about them."

Mandatory Nature and Lack of Alternatives

A recurring theme was the mandatory nature of access codes for certain course materials, which left students feeling trapped into paying higher costs with no real option to opt out without losing access to required resources. Student agency is diminished when instructors integrate course materials that require access codes to complete requirements.

"Students who have mandatory graded assignments accessible ONLY through access codes within a purchased textbook cannot choose to opt out unless the school is then providing the codes. [Product] was mandatory for sophomores and the books were very expensive."

"I'd prefer to wait till the first day and ask the professor if the course materials are truly needed before wasting money. Half of the time we never use them and I'm paying double what I have to. Mine are included in my tuition so I have no choice!"

"All the experience I have with this is one of my courses needed this material and this was the only option, and I found it at the campus bookstore and nowhere else. I didn't like the fact it was the only option."

"Cheats students out of money when they drop a class before using the codes since they will lose the money because the system makes the code a final sale. no refunds/exchanges."

"Had to spend $80+ on access code for Spanish or I would have failed the course because that was the way we did homework."

"I didn't know there was an opt out policy. I didn't think I could. I would have preferred to look at the availability and costs of textbooks elsewhere before having them taken out of my tuition."

"I have found that when the cost is bundled it is often impossible to complete the course materials without that specific course item. This often means "opt-out" is not possible to succeed in the course. This is usually when completing questions within the textbook are graded. I would prefer to have the opportunity to find cheaper options myself."

Inclusive Access Conclusions

There are several important caveats to consider when interpreting these results.

The first is that Inclusive Access programs are relatively new, and the results we have do not provide a clear comparison between students who have used only Inclusive Access, those who have used it for some portion of their education, and those who have not used it at all. We can only compare those who have never used access code programs with those who have used them for any portion of their courses.

A second issue is that the materials acquired through an Inclusive Access program may not cover all the costs required for courses, just as a textbook may not be the only required material. For example, students may still need to pay for lab fees or art supplies regardless of whether the course uses access codes, traditional print textbooks, or free, openly licensed materials.

Finally, because the programs are new, some student concerns could be addressed over time. Many negative comments reflect poor implementation issues like codes not working, incorrect activation instructions, and inexact communication about the program. Future implementations may be less prone to errors than current ones.

Given these caveats, the study does not find evidence that Inclusive Access has improved students' academic lives.

Student experiences with Inclusive Access are mixed, with two negative comments for every positive comment. Among the minority with a positive view on access codes, students cite the belief that the program ensures everyone has the same material or note that it is convenient for them personally. Negative comments focus on the inflexibility, lack of transparency, and loss of financial agency in Inclusive Access programs.

Some comments from the much larger group of students with negative perceptions of the programs could potentially be addressed through better implementation. Issues such as non-working codes, codes for incorrect materials, or bookstore codes that do not match those required by the professor might be addressed with improved planning and execution. Clearer communication could help reduce the many complaints about the lack of transparency surrounding the programs.

However, better implementation and clearer communication would not address most of the negative student feedback. The mandatory nature of the programs, which prevents students from choosing cheaper options and diminishes their agency; the fact that the codes expire; the frustration about being forced to buy everything at a fixed price; and the lack of format options (such as print instead of digital) are issues that remain even in well-managed programs.

The results shown here do not indicate that Inclusive Access programs enhance the academic experience of Virginia students. While these programs may be administratively more convenient for some students, more students reported loss of financial agency and continuing concerns about course materials costs under these programs.

The analysis also points to a need for additional research to compare student experience (e.g., worry levels, course selection, access to course materials, and academic performance) during semesters with Inclusive Access with that during semesters with traditional textbooks or a combination of the two.

While future improvements may address some of the concerns surfaced by this study, institutions should critically assess whether Inclusive Access programs, as they are currently structured, are meeting meet their intended goals.

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Methodology

The George Mason University IRB (GMU IRB Study ID: STUDY00000231) reviewed and approved the revised survey, protocol, and student recruitment messages.

The Virginia Course Materials Survey was distributed as an email invitation through each institution's respective survey distribution office. Campus partners managed the distribution via email to a random sample of at least 20% of students or 100 students, whichever was greater, who were 18 years of age or older and not in the prison population.

There were two data collection periods: one in Spring 2025 and another in Fall 2025 for institutions that could not participate during the primary Spring data collection period. Spring data collection was open from March 3 to May 3, 2025, and Fall data collection from September 28 to November 9, 2025. Each participating institution chose when to send survey invitations to its students during those periods. Respondents who completed the survey could enter a random drawing for one of five $100 gift cards or one of 180 $25 gift cards. A second raffle was offered for the fall distribution that included a random drawing for one of 80 $25 gift cards.

All survey questions were optional; students could skip any they chose. Students could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. There was no link between the student survey answers and the information form used to enter the drawings. Researchers could not link student names or email addresses to responses since the institutions distributed the survey.

A total of 9,089 valid student responses were received in the Spring period, along with 764 responses in the Fall. Overall, 9,853 responses came from students across 40 of the 70 VIVA higher education institutions. These included representation from all four categorized institution types: public doctoral, public four-year, public two-year, and private non-profit.

Virtually all questions were asked of the entire sample, resulting in a 95% confidence interval of +/- 1% or less. The few questions with skip logic, asked only to a subset of respondents, have slightly wider confidence intervals.

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VIVA extends its gratitude to the **2025 Virginia Course Materials Survey Review/Revise Working Group** for their work reviewing the 2021 Virginia Course Materials Survey and adaptations made by other state systems. Their careful analysis and recommendations resulted in a revised instrument that addressed the current landscape while maintaining alignment with local, statewide, and national benchmarks.

2025 Virginia Course Materials Survey Review/Revise Working Group

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Finally, VIVA would like to thank all member institutions that participated in the survey. The strong statewide response has yielded robust data that enables meaningful analysis and will inform initiatives that directly support students across Virginia.

Participating Institutions

Public, Doctoral

George Mason University
James Madison University
Old Dominion University
Radford University
University of Virginia
Virginia Commonwealth University
Virginia Tech
William & Mary

Public, 4-Year

Longwood University
Norfolk State University
University of Mary Washington
University of Virginia, College at Wise

Public, 2-Year

Blue Ridge Community College
Brightpoint Community College
Central Virginia Community College
Eastern Shore Community College
Germanna Community College
J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College
Mountain Empire Community College
Mountain Gateway Community College
New River Community College
Patrick & Henry Community College
Piedmont Virginia Community College
Southside Virginia Community College
Southwest Virginia Community College
Tidewater Community College
Virginia Highlands Community College
Virginia Peninsula Community College
Virginia Western Community College
Wytheville Community College

Private, Non-Profit

Bridgewater College
Eastern Mennonite University
Emory & Henry University
Hollins University
Marymount University
Randolph College
Randolph-Macon College
Roanoke College
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University of Lynchburg