

**DRAFT:**

**To: Helen Dragas, Rector  
Mark Kington, Vice Rector**

**From: Teresa A. Sullivan, President**

**Date: May 3, 2012**

**RE: Academic Strategy**

---

I have now had my senior team in place for nearly an entire academic year, and I am writing to provide a personal perspective on strategic direction for the Academic Division at the University. Since I arrived in August 2010, I have worked with the Rector and Visitors on planning for two other important functions of the University: the strategic plan for the Health Center and a strategic exercise to examine and benchmark our financial aid program, AccessUVa. These two areas represent large financial commitments of the University and also important risk areas. The academic program, however, is the heart of our mission. These ideas here have been shaped by discussion with the Provost, the Chief Operating Officer, deans, and other key personnel, but this framing is my own.

At the time of my appointment, I was explicitly instructed not to do a strategic plan for the academic program. The University had already conducted a series of strategic plans, and the faculty were said to be fatigued and discouraged by the lack of follow-through on those plans. For the last several years, the University of Virginia has been guided by the strategic plans, *Virginia 2020* and the *Commission on the Future of the University (COFU)*. These documents have served as a roadmap for the advancement

of the University. The central strategies of Virginia 2020 (developed in 2002) focused on four themes: fine and performing arts, science and technology, international activities, and public service and outreach. COFU (developed in 2008) narrowed the focus to three immediate priorities: the student experience, advancing education and research in STEM-H fields, and global education. The Board has been provided several updates on COFU and the University has made limited strides forward in implementing the aspirations expressed by these plans.

Our faculty and schools continue to be ranked among the best in the nation. Law, McIntire, and Darden have strong claims to be top ten schools. Nursing and Curry have had recent notable increases in their rankings. Our lowest rankings are in the schools that together educate most of the undergraduates: the College, SEAS, and Architecture. These schools have strong specialties and specialists, but not the overall recognition enjoyed by other schools. Nevertheless, the overall undergraduate program is ranked second or third among public institutions, surpassed only by the flagship University of California institutions that are larger and much more invested in the sciences than Virginia. It is true that we have some international “star” quality faculty, but many fewer than most of our peer institutions. Rather than relying on a star system, Virginia has achieved its rankings through strong teams of faculty, and the whole has been greater than the sum of its parts.

Although there is certainly much we can learn by examining what is occurring at peer universities, leadership in higher education requires that we set our own sights and

set the standards for others to emulate. This was the aspiration of Mr. Jefferson and one I hold as a central tenet of our mission. With each generation the University of Virginia has aspired to define its own model for higher education, one that continues to be widely respected for its originality. Our community seeks to be distinctive in several ways. Our efforts are rooted in a set of *core principles*: excellence, honor and self-governance, innovation and collaboration in the pursuit of knowledge, leadership for the public good, and providing a vibrant breadth of academic offerings within and across our schools. These principles define us, were originally expressed by Mr. Jefferson, and must continue to serve as the guideposts for our future strategic development. These principles shape how we choose our academic strategies, how we teach our students and prepare them, and how we bring the knowledge, energy and commitment developed in the university to the benefit of society through service.

A second important characteristic of the University is *scale*. Our competitor public institutions are typically much larger, and we have foregone the economies of scale they can achieve in favor of an emphasis on smaller courses and closer interaction. Our competitor private institutions are typically smaller, but do not face the political pressures to grow in the service of the Commonwealth that we feel. One result of our scale is that our departments are typically smaller than those at most research universities (including privates). Rankings are known to correlate with size. Thus, our choice to remain relatively small means that collaboration across the Grounds – the ability to achieve a critical mass of faculty in some important problem areas -- will be a necessary ingredient in our continued academic recognition. The University's choice to remain

relatively small constrains some of the choices that we can make, but it underscores our commitment to prioritize *quality*.

At this time, I identify five major issues as strategically important for the University.

First, the University of Virginia suffers from a **budgetary model** that does not promote academic excellence in the current competitive world of higher education. The current model has allowed the University to achieve a great deal, but the University has now outgrown the model. The highly-centralized decision-making fostered by the current model frustrates planning, innovation, and collaboration, while hardening silos. The silos in turn frustrate the very collaboration that I believe we need to overcome the disadvantages of small scale. Thus, a key strategic initiative of my administration is to implement a budget system that enables multi-year academic strategic planning, incentivizes cross-Grounds activities that will pull together the collective strengths of our schools, and a model that will provide, to the extent possible, long term financial stability for the University. If we do not get the resources aligned appropriately with the academic vision, then we will lose our competitive edge in the years to come.

Second, **faculty hiring** must be a critical area of emphasis. This is a financial problem, but it cannot be reduced to only a financial problem. Making the right hires is critical. We project significant retirements over the next 5-10 years, with the possibility that half of the faculty who will be at the University of Virginia in 2020 are not on

Grounds today. We will need in addition to expand the faculty modestly to account for the small increases in enrollment we have planned. Many of our peer schools have similar demographic challenges, and to succeed in hiring the right people will require vigilance on the search and recruitment processes as well as resources to compete with our peer schools. At this time I believe our search and recruitment processes to be less than adequate.

We face a special challenge in hiring new faculty. Every institution says that it prizes teaching, but the University really does. Virginia's unique undergraduate experience cannot be maintained with the average PhD being produced in American universities. Despite being excellent scholars and researchers, most of them have little teacher preparation and many of them have little interest in undergraduates. But assessing future research potential – imprecise as it is – is probably more accurate than assessing teaching potential. We have an opportunity here to innovate – perhaps with teaching postdoctoral fellowships or residencies that would allow future faculty to hone their teaching abilities just as the traditional post-doctoral fellowship allows young scientists to hone their research abilities. In addition, we must plan purposefully to socialize new faculty into what is special about Virginia, because it will be too costly and time-consuming merely to assume that the usual market forces will suffice. *These issues are rarely addressed today, and run counter to the traditional faculty culture.*

Third, the University of Virginia suffers from a **reputation gap**—or, alternatively, we have somehow been overachieving. In a number of critical areas we are

reputed to be better than we actually are. Even simple metrics (number of National Academy Members, members of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, International Award Winners) show that we are not as excellent as our rankings imply. Our traditional strengths and international reputation have come from the humanities and the professional schools. The more recent emphasis on science and engineering is interpreted in some quarters as a sign that we will no longer cherish our traditional strengths, and recent political attacks on universities reinforce this fear. Meanwhile, our need to improve STEM fields persists. This situation creates a challenge and a vulnerability that needs to be addressed through substantive and strategic improvements. Some of the changes needed are reasonably easy, such as being much more proactive in nominating our faculty for the honors for which they are eligible. The more enduring improvement will need to be in the area of faculty hiring. Even though we will be searching for faculty who are excellent teachers and mentors, we will still need to find intellectual leaders.

Fourth, we have a **fragile “top-ten”** standing of some of the professional schools and academic departments. It must be candidly admitted that some of the fields that bring us the greatest distinction are not those in which most people would today invest (e.g., Spanish, English, Religious Studies). In some of these units, our reputation is derived from a small number of faculty, rendering the reputation of those units particularly vulnerable to the outside recruitment of a single person or a few departures of senior leaders. This problem has been accentuated in the last few years by our inability to keep faculty salaries of our best people competitive with those at peer institutions. An

examination of the packages used to lure some of these people away from us shows that extraordinary resources are being assembled. A recent offer included a salary increase of more than \$100K, subsidized housing and school tuition for dependents, the ability to hire two or three additional faculty of the person's choosing, and the creation of a new research center as a personal research playground for the former Virginia faculty member.

Keeping UVa intellectually challenging for these faculty may be the key to retaining them, even without the kind of gold-plated offer described in the previous paragraph. The Center for Contemplative Sciences (described below) helped us keep a key member of the Religious Studies department. Our robust digital humanities program is helping us keep scholars in English and History. Future academic investments must be viewed with an eye to such attractiveness, and the leading faculty in many fields must feel that they have the leadership opportunities without having to leave Charlottesville.

Fifth, **curricular issues** in undergraduate education need to be addressed. Although this is a traditional responsibility of the faculty, I believe that administrative leadership can be helpful. We currently lavish many resources on first-year and second-year courses, even though increasingly our students come to us having already completed substantial portions of the traditional lower-division curriculum. We have many competitors for the lower division (AP, dual enrollment with community colleges, IB, transfer credits), but essentially none for the upper division. We have a great opportunity

here to reallocate scarce faculty resources toward the third and fourth year courses where there are no substitutes for their expertise.

For those courses that we do deliver in the lower division, we should consider much more fundamental redesign toward hybrid courses and problem-based approaches. In particular, careful attention to the entry courses in the sciences and engineering might well yield higher retention in those courses and greater numbers of graduates in those fields, without further enlarging the size of the student body. Promulgating vertical research teams (faculty-postdoctoral fellows-graduate students-undergraduate students) offers us a way to leverage the richness of a research university for undergraduates, while also providing a richer environment for the scientists and engineers we seek to retain.

Analysis of our curriculum should also concentrate on the negative space: the areas we should be emphasizing. Computational science is one such area, and draws on the expertise of faculty from many areas in recognizing that the twenty-first century enjoys unprecedented quantities of data, but has underdeveloped methods for transforming data into information. Previous strategic plans have identified science, engineering, international programs, and the arts as areas in need of further development, but it is probably more effective for us to sharpen our focus within these broad areas and to emphasize areas in which we might do hiring in multiple departments/schools (again offsetting the scale disadvantage). Computation represents one such area, but there are surely others.



Several initiatives underway would develop intellectual areas in novel ways. Examples are the Quantitative Collective in the College (broad quantitative developments across the social sciences, digital humanities, mathematics and statistics); sustainability (multiple interests across colleges and schools); and contemplative sciences (mind-body interactions explored through humanities, social sciences, and medicine). Others that are in various stages of development include design; entrepreneurship; leadership; and various aspects of globalization. Developing such areas gives us robust targets for new faculty recruitment, leverages our existing strengths, minimizes our disadvantages such as small scale, and provides our students with knowledge and skills particularly suited to this century.

In the last 20 months, I have sought to implement strategic programs to develop such academic programs, where there is significant buy-in and ownership by the faculty. The Center for Contemplative Studies, for which we had a soft launch over Founder's weekend, is an example of a cross-Grounds program that brings distinction to the University. This was an area in which we had great individual excellence, but now are able to realize a footprint that is larger than any one of the contributing colleges/schools. Without diminishing any existing program, this new Center allows us to combine faculty strengths in new ways, and our students are already greatly energized by the prospects. I believe that there are similar initiatives that would simultaneously help us make progress simultaneously on several of the strategic issues identified above.

I must also mention one overarching *tactical issue*. There is a fair amount of routine organizational maintenance at UVa that has been left undone for many years. Just as deferred maintenance on a building leads to eventual decay, so does the deferred maintenance of the organization. While not glamorous nor especially strategic, the administration must devote time to these areas over the next few years if we are to make progress on our strategic directions. It would be a mistake to dismiss these efforts as mere blocking and tackling. The budget might normally be viewed as merely tactical, but I believe that it is so critical that it rises to strategic importance. On a more clearly tactical level, the policies by which we hire, evaluate, promote, reward, and retain faculty are in serious need of review and revision. Policies in a number of important functional areas are underdeveloped, with the result that much valuable faculty and administrative time is wasted. Entrepreneurial research faculty have been frustrated by a maze of bureaucracy that we are seeking to untangle. Relationships with some government funders have been allowed to deteriorate or have never been established, even though they would be very helpful to the research enterprise. Making progress on these administrative issues will position us for success on the more strategic directions, and if we do not improve our basic administrative processes we will not succeed in the large strategic areas outlined above.

Finally, *what would the University look like within ten years?* Acceptance to the University would be highly selective and the University would attract the nation's best high school graduates. The University would maintain and improve its academic strength despite having replaced a substantial number of retired faculty with new faculty, most of

them hired for their first full-time faculty positions and nearly all of them hoping to remain at UVa for their careers. These faculty members will often have served a teaching residency before entering the tenure track, and they will have been carefully screened and recruited. Most faculty will be appointed to both a traditional discipline and to an interdisciplinary center, and they will stay intellectually challenged by having a larger group of colleagues even though the size of their disciplinary department will have increased only marginally. In a few cases, small departments will have been closed, but the faculty from these departments will have alternative teaching assignments readily available because of the breadth of their intellectual preparation and interests.

Faculty will find their teaching energizing, and many teachers will find themselves in high demand among the students. Some of the most popular majors will be in areas that were not commonly taught only ten years earlier. Hybrid courses will be common for introductory courses, providing online resources for students to review material (such as math modules) and also providing asynchronous means to complete the introductory courses that other students will have completed in high school. The new faculty will teach relatively more third- and fourth-year students than today's faculty do. Faculty will interact frequently with students through vertical research teams and other co-curricular activities, and UVA will be known for the close interaction among students and faculty.

Student achievement will be carefully documented, and most students will have pursued both a traditional major and a second specialization in an interdisciplinary area.

All students will have completed a substantial, integrated capstone project that demonstrates scholarly or creative accomplishment, represents original research, or documents practical problem-solving. Transcripts will record not only the courses and grades taken, but also badges to indicate whether a student has had an international experience, has participated in community service, has held a leadership position, or has produced creative work. Students will eagerly work to have as many of these badges on their transcripts as possible, and employers will find the enhanced transcripts a better guide than traditional transcripts for predicting how graduates will perform on the job.

The University as a whole will invest routinely in cutting-edge ideas and research areas, using a regular prioritizing process to shift resources away from low-priority activities. University policies and procedures will be aligned and the organizational structures streamlined, so that both faculty and students find it easy to navigate the institution. The Board of Visitors will continue to be the most highly sought-after appointed position in the Commonwealth.