Priorities and Concerns of the University of Virginia Student Council

GATHERED AND COMPILED WITH INPUT FROM ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES FROM ALL SCHOOLS
ON BEHALF OF THE STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The purpose of Student Council is to protect and improve the rights, opportunities, and quality of life of every student at the University of Virginia. The authority of Student Council is derived from the students of the University of Virginia, and is collectively recognized by the Board of Visitors, the University President and other University Administrators.

The University of Virginia Student Council exceeds 225 students both appointed and elected from every school at the University of Virginia, with representatives from all undergraduate and graduate schools. As an organization, Student Council is more diverse than the University of Virginia student body as a whole.

The actions we take as an organization are governed by a motto, one given the utmost weight by our membership:

Your Voice, Our Vision.

The core programs of the University of Virginia Student Council are designed to gather feedback from students. These programs — such as SpeakUpUVa.com — continue to have great success, and have served as the model for feedback structures in numerous other institutions throughout the country. That is to say, the University of Virginia Student Council is among the best in the country, if not the very best, at drawing input directly from students. As such, our organization has a unique pulse on the will of the student body, and a sworn responsibility to ensure this will is carried out to the absolute best of our ability.

Enumerated below are the *Priorities and Concerns of the University of Virginia Student Council*. We believe them to

be of marked importance to the student body, and to the future of the University of Virginia. The Student Council respectfully calls upon the Board of Visitors and University Administration to give serious weight to the priorities and concerns found below. We hope this document is the beginning of an ongoing dialogue between Student Council and the Board, and we thank you in advance for your time.

On Behalf of the Self-Governed,

Eric McDaniel
Eric McDaniel
President, University of Virginia Student Council

Priorities and Concerns

AccessUVa: Continuing Commitment to Meet 100 Percent of Demonstrated Student Need

A report released July 31, 2013 by researchers at Georgetown University asserts that U.S. colleges and universities exacerbate racial and economic inequities that plague American society. AccessUVa is our chance to reverse rather than aggravate trends that lock the country's brightest young minds into the lowest socioeconomic brackets. The program has increased the proportion of aid that goes to students in the form of unrestricted institutional grants rather than loans or other long-term financial burdens. This increase in unrestricted aid has helped attract and retain bright students from a variety of backgrounds who would otherwise be unable to afford an education at an institution of U.Va.'s caliber.

A robust financial-aid program helps the University defend its reputation as a school for the public. The Princeton Review in 2013 named the University the number-one "best value" among U.S. public universities. Such a recognition accords with a driving institutional goal: to offer a world-class education open to all students who demonstrate the requisite merit — not simply those who can traditionally afford it.

Certainly it is expensive for the University to sustain AccessUVa: institutional spending in fiscal year 2013 increased to roughly $40.2 million. But it is essential that the school continue to make financial aid a budget priority.

AccessUVa's importance, however, goes beyond matters of reputation and finance; it is also a matter of social responsibility. In an 1818 letter to Joseph C. Cabell — who served on the University's first Board of Visitors — Jefferson wrote that "A system of general instruction, which shall reach every description of our citizens from the *richest to the poorest*, as it was the earliest, so will it be the latest, of all the public concerns in which I shall permit myself to take an interest" (emphasis added). As Mr. Jefferson's University, we must aim to serve the citizens not simply because of the taxes they pay, but because it is our responsibility as the foremost public institution of higher learning. For many years, we have upheld the ideal of equal access, of judgment based on merit and merit alone. It is absolutely imperative that we continue to do so.

Sources:
AccessUVa data:
http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/local/u-va-draft-report/77/

Princeton Review:
http://www.princetonreview.com/best-value-press-release.aspx

Georgetown report:
http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/31/report-documents-how-higher-education-exacerbates-racial-inequities

Committing to Racial Diversity in the Student Body

The University is rapidly approaching the 200th anniversary of its founding. In the years since 1819, our history with race has been fraught with truly striking inequities. The degree to which we were behind our peers is a stain on the University's otherwise sterling reputation, one which will last for many years to come. Yet in the past two decades, we made incredible strides in an attempt to become a decidedly progressive institution. It looked to be the dawn of a new age of social consciousness for the University of Virginia.

With this in mind, in the last several years there has been a significant decline in the percentage of minority students choosing to enroll at the University of Virginia. This drop has been particularly pronounced in students identifying as African-American. While part of this decline can be attributed to the new methodology for racial identification— namely the ability to choose more than one race —these numbers had be decreasing prior to the change.

We now have the opportunity to move beyond our past failings and firmly establish ourselves as an institution committed to the diversity of our student body and the benefits this diversity brings.

We ask the Board of Visitors to work along with Student Council and the rest of the University to foster a welcoming climate for every prospective student who arrives on Grounds, and to increase efforts to recruit and retain the highest caliber students from under-represented groups.

Restructure Student Representation on the Board:

Non-Voting Undergraduate Member & Non-Voting Graduate Member

The student member of the Board of Visitors serves as an avenue for direct and continuous dialogue between the University's nearly 22,000 students and the highest level of University leadership — that is, the Board.

Currently, the Board's student member can be either a graduate or an undergraduate student. Each year, this structure of representation neglects a large portion of the University community. Though all equally part of the University, graduate students and undergraduate students have incredibly distinct sets of concerns, interests and goals. To expect an undergraduate student to adequately represent the graduate-student population — or vice versa — is fraught with challenge. The Board needs a representative from both the undergraduate and graduate levels of the University experience to adequately understand the needs and insights of the entire student population. We are comfortable that both representatives should remain non-voting.

The Boards of other institutions in Virginia, and leading universities elsewhere, have already implemented this student representative structure to great effect. Though past student members have accomplished a great deal, this change to student representation on the Board is necessary to ensure the whole of the student community is heard at the top level of University governance. Student Council would like to see the Board of Visitors address this inequality by the time a new student member is to be appointed in the spring of 2014.

Institutionalized Transparency

Shared responsibility lies at the foundation of the Academical Village. Difficulties at the University have historically arisen when decisions made by leadership are perceived to be unnecessarily top-down. The University must not compromise the traits on which it was founded for the sake of expediency.

The University of Virginia is an institution of many traditions: the democratic tradition, the tradition of self-governance, the tradition of Honor. If allowed to flourish, closed-door decision making and non-consultative governance would fray the very fabric of the University's culture, potentially irreparably. It would significantly undermine the democratic sensibility of Jefferson's goals for the University. The institutions which make us unique — such as the Honor Committee and Student Council — put into practice these ideals. In doing so, they exemplify how a leadership that engages its constituents inherently strengthens and enriches the communities served.

It has become clear that the University of Virginia is now at a crossroads, and though there are many changes we as an institution must make to remain on top, sacrificing the very traits that led us here must not be one of them. Student Council asks the Board of Visitors to keep this philosophy of governance in mind as we take steps to enact the University's Strategic Plan in the coming years. We feel very strongly the importance of keeping the core philosophy of the University in mind as we move into our third century.

Common Sense Technology and Planning

The University's intellectual capital is immense. To take full advantage of the talents of its students, faculty and administrators, the University must adopt elegant and easy-to-use technological tools to conduct research and logistical operations. Over the past decade the University has made significant strides in the implementation of these systems, however the outcomes of these efforts have been by and large underwhelming for the amount of capital invested. Moving forward, the University needs to be smarter about the way these investments are made.

Programs such as the Student Information System (SIS) highlight one of the ways in which the University has fallen prey to a sunk-cost bias. As a result of the initial and costly investment into transitioning from ISIS to SIS, the administration has been reluctant to acknowledge the massive failings of the system. As recently as August 1, 2013, SIS crashed instantaneously under the burden of first-year students signing online for the first time to adjust their schedules.

In almost every other fashion, the University of Virginia is a modern and progressive institution, and yet our technological systems are woefully behind. It is time for strategic and decisive action as a community to address what is perhaps our most stark inadequacy.

Upon its release in February 2009, SIS was billed as "a giant step to catch up" to peer institutions. Four years, we find ourselves still several paces behind. Technology exists solely to make difficult, time-consuming tasks simple and easy; this is vital to keep in mind when evaluating a system's efficacy. And as to whether students feel our current systems meet these needs— the answer is a resounding no.

Certainly, these problems extend beyond SIS, into areas such as email systems and their naming conventions, and dated phone infrastructure. More than just the predominate stakeholders in these systems, students and faculty understand the characteristics and nuance of the University's technological needs with more clarity than any other group. With that in mind, Student Council recommends the University not only make revamping our technological infrastructure a priority, but also firmly commit to faculty and student partnership in the design and implementation of these large-scale systems.

The University of Virginia Student Council is incredibly grateful for the continued hard work and support of the Board of Visitors; without you, our efforts would not be possible. Your willingness to solicit and incorporate student input into the strategic planning process — through programs like ImagineUVa — exemplifies the values upon which the University of Virginia was founded: a tight-knit community of education, dialogue, and shared responsibility. We remain, even today, an Academical Village bound together by the values of honor and self-governance.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider our insights. Together, we can achieve great things for the University, and Student Council is looking forward to working with you in the year to come. Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns about the preceding pages, and we will be sure to answer them promptly. Please do not hesitate to contact us throughout the year. Should you request it, we are free to attend and present at any of your meetings, just as we hope you will join us at some of ours.

To the bright future of Mr. Jefferson's University,

University of Virginia Student Council, for the Self–Governed.

Prepared by the Student Council Representative Body and Executive Team.

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