

# EDUCATION IN VIRGINIA: From Founding to Millennium<sup>1</sup>

by

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To paraphrase former Governor Gerald Baliles, “Yes, Santa, there is a Virginia, a distinct polity, with a distinguished history. Not perfect, by any stretch, but always rich with possibilities...” Governor Baliles’s apothegm illustrates especially well the history and future of Virginia higher education. And he went on, in a celebration of Governor Godwin, silently to prove his point about Virginia’s imperfections and its promise in a dramatic misquotation of Thomas Jefferson’s most intriguingly contentious assertion, that “the earth belongs to the living.” “Life belongs to the living,” Governor Baliles rather anti-climactically proclaimed, and “each generation of Virginians must accept its responsibility to the next,” which was James Madison’s retort to Jefferson’s original thrust.

Thomas Jefferson, of course, founded the University of Virginia, acting as chair of the board of commissioners who planned the University and as Rector on its initial board of visitors. In designing the University Jefferson leaned heavily on James Madison, who led him to include *The Federalist Papers*, for example, along with the “Declaration of Independence,” as a fundamental document to be used for instruction in the nature and structure of republican government.

The founding of the University of Virginia was the Commonwealth’s first, fully conscious expression of a commitment to public education, primary and higher. It entailed a vision far broader than the vision for the University itself, one that has sustained the growth of a system that reflects remarkably well those original ambitions despite having been detoured by the “earthquake” of the War of the American Union and, since, the tortured history of Jim Crow and racial segregation.

If one examines this history with the eye of an evolutionist, one would be impressed with the extraordinary progress made toward a clear goal in somewhat less than two hundred years. That would be wrong and misleading, however, for the real story of Virginia higher education, as with its now vibrant economy, is how much has been accomplished in not quite thirty years. That is, Virginia has really progressed principally since the era of “massive resistance,” an era that carried anti-miscegenation statutes in the laws as late as 1967. For it is only since the end of the 1960s that the entire community college system has been created; that the system of public colleges and universities have expanded sufficiently to make the promise of access for all citizens a realistic possibility; that Virginia’s information technology industry emerged into national and world leadership; and that Virginia’s public colleges and universities have come to be recognized as among the best in the country, public and private.

We point out not only the University of Virginia but also Mary Washington College, the College of William and Mary (our oldest college), Hampton University, Virginia Military Institute, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, James Madison University, Sweet Briar College, Randolph Macon College, and Washington and Lee University as having received notable recognition nationally. So, too, have other of our institutions demonstrated the high quality of

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the contributions they are making. Our own Old Dominion University has been a trendsetter in distance education. And this list only scratches the surface of the particular accomplishments and recognition that have come to characterize Virginia higher education.

By recognizing the most recent accomplishments of Virginia higher education no one should imagine that there were no prior accomplishments. Our historically black colleges and universities, for example, played a unique role in preparing the citizen body that could advance beyond the early years of racial division and in the now important efforts to realize a truly unified system of higher education.

Virginia today offers higher education for over 350,000 students enrolled in public, private not-for-profit, and private for-profit institutions. Moreover, since the turn of the twentieth century, when only three per cent of Virginians had attained any college education, we find over fifty percent of the adult citizens having had at least some college – a dramatic mushrooming not only of numbers but also of the role of higher education in shaping other aspects of Virginia life, including its robust economy and its increasing political sophistication.

From the beginning of the present century, when the Virginia General Assembly finally began to embrace the goal for which Jefferson had so much labored in frustration, public support of education, to the present hour Virginia has erected an educational foundation that bears all the insignia of cultural preservation and economic development. The growth of our institutions reflects this not only in continuing public support – which necessarily responds to the ups and downs of political and economic circumstances – but also in the increasing growth of private support for colleges and universities. As the 1996 report of the General Accounting Organization relates, Virginia ranks sixth nationally in attracting private support for public institutions of higher education. Today, billions of endowment dollars help to support our colleges and universities.

Our colleges and universities are also economic drivers, not only pumping \$2.3 billion into Virginia's economy every year, but also providing the basis for the increasingly important knowledge industries that drive economic growth. In the era in which business needs change with increasing frequency, the strengthening of educational fundamentals through continuous quality assessment, as well as the provision of unique skills, creates an effective spine along which run the nerve endings of economic progress.

That we shook off the incubus of a troubled racial past and educational backwardness to produce such dramatic progress in not quite thirty years is a remarkable story, that tells far more about Virginia's prospects for the twenty-first century than its pre-1960s history could ever convey. For while Virginia began well with the leadership of true founders, that genius flowered elsewhere in the United States far more fully than it did in Virginia – at least until now.

When Governor Baliles skillfully corrected Jefferson's apothegm into a life affirming commitment to Madison's version, he identified Virginia's best as Virginia's standard. Despite a history of multiple textures, we may still say, from beginning to end, that Virginia's standard in higher education is Virginia's best.