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PLANNING VIRGINIA'S EDUCATIONAL FUTURE

By

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Thank you very much for your marvelous introduction. It's always a pleasure to return to Norfolk, to the area where America began, as it were. And it clarifies the mind to be reminded of the need for institutions and individuals to confront their origins in order to understand themselves.

Education is the number-one issue of our Governor, as he has shown in both word and deed. Properly understood, it is the leading domestic issue of the 2000 presidential campaign. But what are the candidates actually saying about education? What problems should they be addressing? What virtues should they be enhancing? What should be the real core of this debate?

Let me contribute Virginia's voice to the conversation about higher education. Let me suggest how our 1999 Virginia Plan for Higher Education is committed to our Founding principles as Americans and to a Republican vision on education and the campaign in general.

By law the State Council of Higher Education must prepare a plan for higher education in the system and update it every two years. Our just-published update reflects a team effort, including the Members of the State Council, the professional staff, state officials, business and civic leaders, and educators and students from Virginia's colleges and universities, private as well as public.

Since 1974 the broad aims of access, quality, affordability, and accountability have been the guiding principles of public higher education in the Commonwealth. While continuing to embrace these cornerstones of the vision for our system, the 1999 Plan articulates five goals to maintain Virginia's preeminence in this nation. These five new approaches can help keep Virginia the leader and a national model of emulation. One critic of the Plan claimed that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. But we know full well that

this that attitude is one that will quickly lead to our living in ruins, while claiming we are still in the glories of yesteryear. A status quo approach won't keep pace with the competition we have, here and abroad. The quickest way to guarantee defeat is by sitting on a lead. That's why our Plan is entitled *ADVANCING the System of Higher Education in Virginia*.

The Plan's five approaches to excellence are as follows:

- 1: Decentralizing the system, within a context of continuous quality assessment.
- 2: Focusing on educational outcomes and the value added to each student.
- 3: Planning system-wide so that the needs of all constituents of higher education are met.
- 4: Encouraging collaborative programming across institutions.
- 5: Ensuring the planning and funding needed so that the physical campus sustains the educational mission.

As I link these new goals to our broad, well-established educational aims, the political teaching is, well, self-evident.

Just as America had its original contract in the Declaration of Independence, so there has existed an education contract among Virginians. Public education seeks the intellectual, cultural, and economic development of a self-governing citizenry. The most vital component to deliver on this contract is to provide access, at the appropriate level, to all who seek higher education. Who are they? First of all, the young, advancing in the arts of mature citizens. But also men and women who are life-long learners. And researchers who expand our knowledge of medicine, science, law, engineering, business, and the other useful arts as well as the liberal arts. To assure the preservation of this contract between the Commonwealth and its citizens, the Virginia Plan proposes five great principles.

I. Decentralization. We hire university presidents to manage their campuses in all dimensions—academic standards, hiring, student conduct, long-term funding, and strategic planning. But previously we have forced our presidents, acting as lobbyists, to come to Richmond to seek approval for changes both significant and trivial. Past policy distorts the function of an academic leader. With the 1999 Virginia Plan we advocate returning this responsibility to the appropriate level – a matter of common sense. It matches authority with responsibility. This step will remove much bureaucracy from education and restore (or inject) business planning sense.

At the same time as institutions of higher learning are given more autonomy, we also want to create incentives for them to meet and exceed their capacities to educate. So incentive funding based on performance indicators will be a statewide standard that gives each institution accountability for the State dollars and the private tuition funds it receives. It is passing silly to maintain a system in which decision makers must argue about the Governor and the General Assembly cutting tuition, while the institutions raise non-tuition fees to make up difference. We need leadership, not gamesmanship. That means placing responsibility where it belongs, and then justifiably holding those in authority to account. Such standards are closely tied to our second principle, assessment.

II. Assessment is not some attempt to impose a strait-jacket of uniform measures on all the colleges and universities. It is rather an invitation for each institution in our diverse system to challenge itself to be the best it can be. Why would we, for example, fund the University of Virginia more generously than another college merely because we acknowledge the superiority of the former on some number of criteria?

Given the quality of the students who matriculate at UVA, plus the quality of its faculty, the results should be superlative. These are students who would excel wherever they went. So even the University of Virginia must work at enunciating and aiming at the “value added.” That is, what is the institu-

tion doing for its students to move them to even higher levels of performance? This is the relevant standard to measure UVA's and William and Mary's excellence. This is the relevant standard for each and every one of our institutions!

In assessing itself, each institution would compete first with the goals and targets it sets for itself. Clarity of mission and ambition are the first criteria of successful management. Moreover, on these terms they will readily hold their own in comparisons with similar institutions -- community colleges with community colleges, for example. So the Virginia Plan represents an extraordinary opportunity for all our diverse institutions -- the historically black colleges and universities, Virginia Military Institute, Virginia Tech, George Mason, and the private schools as well -- to build story upon story of achievement. Let the financial rewards go to those institutions that excel based on their own track record and legitimate expectations of what they claim they can do for their students. This approach makes it clear to students, their parents, taxpayers, and to the institutions themselves what they need to do to improve. Virginia's colleges and universities will no longer be micro-managed, because they will be held accountable.

It is a difficult balancing act to maintain standards, yet to allow institutional autonomy, but the Virginia Plan aims to do just this. We believe, for example, that it makes no sense for Richmond to mandate general employment levels for the public institutions. The diverse missions of the institutions ought to drive decision-making about employment levels, and those strategic decisions are best made by persons responsible for leading and managing the institutions. It is precisely to preserve such diversity that we need to plan carefully the way in which the system supports our institutions of higher education. Such diversity points toward the need for system-wide planning that assures serving the needs of all constituents of higher education.

III. Think in state- or system-wide terms. Are we giving a sufficient amount of financial aid? Are students appropriately matched to their schools? Where should we establish new schools and new programs? Are we making appropriate use of technology, such as distance learning possibilities? Are trustees exercising the vigilance we should demand of them? Are all institutions linking their own strategic plans with the evolving Virginia Plan?

We must also consider the impact of the Standards of Learning. How should the system deal with the differences in quality and numbers of college-bound high school students? And as this morning's *Times-Dispatch* reports, Virginia's teacher licensing tests will be among the most rigorous in the country. As the primary and secondary schools improve, so must higher education. All of these concerns in turn point toward the need for collaborative programming throughout the State.

IV. Collaborative programming refers not merely to coordinating resources such as technology and programs, but also developing relationships between the private business sector and our institutions of higher learning. How can the best minds in both business and education cooperate to make the best use of their research and teaching capacities? Here we see the direct contribution of higher education to Virginia's economic development. But a university system is not a collection of computer terminals that could be placed anywhere. So finally we need to look at "capital infrastructures" -- that is, buildings and other infrastructure.

V. The architecture of education. Simply looking at our older campuses -- we think immediately of the Wren building at William and Mary or of the Lawn at Mr. Jefferson's university -- makes us treasure the relationship between venerable buildings and hallowed ideas. But beside the need to maintain the excellence of the past, we also need to acquire reactors, laboratories, and other buildings. How does the new technology of distance learning fit into traditional ideas of the community of teachers and students? This requires a plan as reflective as Jefferson's was.

And with this mention of Jefferson I return to politics. For it has become manifest to me over the past year that there are some people who are more concerned with fighting old political adversaries than with advancing higher education. You can tell by the way they constantly recur to old debates and old players. They resemble the MacBeths dwelling on Banquo's ghost. Instead they should be looking forward to Prospero's return – to rest on Shakespeare for a moment. What I mean is that, settling old scores cannot help advance the cause of Virginia's colleges and universities. Yet, we often see that done in editorials, pseudo-analyses of the state of higher education by interest group lobbies (I don't need to call names), and the posturing of some political leaders.

What troubles me most about politics at this level is that it misleads, not from lies and deceit but from the sheer inadequacy of its ideas. One prominent Virginia interest group is always quick with a spurious scientific analysis of the state of higher education. But I caution you not to inspect it too closely. What you will find is a set of measures as distant and indirect as some far away galaxy, saying little or nothing about the true state of higher education.

This is manifest, for example, in the missed opportunity to celebrate the fact that Governors and the General Assembly acted wisely enough in recent times to assure that Virginia higher education is more affordable today than it has been in a decade – since 1989. But this has been missed altogether by Cassandras crying out that “Virginia is a high tuition state.” Sure, by an unexplained ranking of several states in some form of high order data, that is true (though less so than just a few years ago). But is it meaningful? Or is it perhaps not more meaningful that Virginia is a high financial aid state?

The kinds of things we hear from representatives of these interest groups are not unlike the case of someone wanting to take your body temperature by calculating it as a datum in the cosmos. We can do that. We can start with the moon and its ambient atmosphere, measuring temperature gradients precisely. From there we can advance our measurements through space and on into earth's atmosphere, checking every interval over 240,000 miles. We could descend minutely through that atmosphere to measure temperature variations all across the earth, distinguishing every local variation until isolating on your particular contribution to cosmological variations.

At that point we could tell you whether you have a dangerous fever. Or, we could just place a thermometer beneath your tongue! Both would work more or less. Of course, there are some dangers in the cosmological method should you choose to adopt it. Most importantly, the number of opportunities for introducing error is well nigh infinite, and the errors propagate through the analysis.

The calculation of the moon's temperature contains a certain error probability, and that will multiply to the point that, when we get to your very own body, the error probability will be several orders of magnitude – which means that we could scientifically pronounce you dead even while you stand and breathe and stare us in the face.

Between the methods of higher education's self-appointed watch dogs and those of SCHEV you face the same differences. Their method can pronounce higher education dead, even while we observe it flourishing. My method, on the other hand, providing full and immediate data, will only tell you exactly what its true condition is. They will tell you it is “high tuition,” while I report that it is the most affordable for the average Virginian that it has been for a decade. They tell you the system is under funded, while I tell you that it is funded as well as it ever has been.

That's politics for you. But which analysis to make the foundation of public policy must be more than a matter of politics; it must be a matter of the future of Virginia. Governor Gilmore said it on April 30: “A college education for every Virginian will be essential to the quality of life in the next century.” That is why access – universal access – is a key theme of the 1999 Virginia Plan.

Certainly the educational goals of access, quality, affordability, and accountability all have their political analogues that are essential planks of Republican politics. We see these in equality of opportunity, liberty, fiscal care, decentralization, moral responsibility – in sum, self-government.

The Republican Party, it is commonly said, was formed to combat the spread of slavery. But this does not explain enough. In his June 26, 1857 speech Abraham Lincoln spoke about the meaning of the Declaration of Independence and why the battle against slavery was so important. Humanitarianism was part of it, surely. But for Lincoln the heart of the anti-slavery cause was nothing less than the “sacred right of self-government.” The threat might vary from age to age – British Imperial authority, slavery, or tyrannical foreign governments – but the cause is always the same: the sacred ability of men and women to govern themselves rather than fall prey to the arbitrary rule of another. Today, this undermining of self-government is seen in smug bureaucrats and interest groups’ willfully using power in a whole range of issues that undermine the common sense and common decency of Americans. In higher education we are reminded constantly of the schoolyard bullies of political correctness, whose teaching and example put them squarely at odds with the American political tradition.

In this regard, we need constantly to think like Americans, recalling George Washington, who constantly strove to call his fellow citizens to their higher selves. As he said at the end of the Revolution, “This is the moment to establish or ruin [our] national Character forever.”

We Republicans are neither alarmists nor demagogues when we say that this cause, “the Sacred Fire of Liberty,” is in jeopardy today. For our entire heritage is in jeopardy. We act responsibly, in the spirit of self-government, in proposing sober alternatives to the current willfulness that threatens to undo us.

In the Virginia Plan for Higher Education we offer a sobriety that enforces the virtues of self-government. Moral, fiscal, and political responsibility can lead the way to a restoration of higher education in all its vitality, its classical roots and Jeffersonian expression, in our capacities as thinkers and citizens. Education is indeed the political issue of the moment, as it always has been throughout American history, for it is the heart of the republican cause of self-government.