

***THE VIRGINIA PLAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION FOR 2000-2002:
AN INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMUNAL CREATION***

Address by William B. Allen
at the Senior Seminar of the
Virginia Identification Program for the Advancement of
Women in Higher Education Administration

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Good afternoon. I'm delighted to have this opportunity to talk with you today. I've heard a bit about the aims and accomplishments of the Virginia Identification Program and am impressed by what I've heard. I understand that one of your chief goals is to identify and nurture talent—a goal that I, as an educator, have long made a crucial part of my own lifework. A central tenet of my conception of education is the notion that each generation takes on the responsibility for conveying its accumulated store of knowledge and wisdom to the rising generation, while also keeping in mind that each new generation needs the opportunity to progress on its own over the pathways to knowledge that we ourselves have traveled. My sense is that the leaders in the Identification Project, having attained success as faculty and administrators, now willingly shoulder the responsibility for helping young colleagues to follow in your footsteps and perhaps even to travel further on their journey.

And as a point of personal privilege, let me here recite from my mother, who often addressed to women on occasions such as this words such as these:

“Ours is a great challenge today and with so many conflicting ideas and philosophies floating around us, we wonder just where to start in the struggle of meeting today's problems.”

“All worthwhile things are learned in secret places. Art, music, poetry, prayer, faith, etc. may be practiced in public, but they have to be learned in the still, meditative moments.”

“We meet today fully aware of the conditions, circumstances, and times in which we live. We cannot be faithful disciples of truth and close our eyes to the unfolding drama of history, which is filled with events that are tragic and dramatic. We live in an age that is one of the most peculiar in the whole of human history. It is full of paradoxes, contrasts, and conflicts. In many respects this is one of the most enlightened periods in the history of mankind. Through research and investigation man has come to new authority, new powers, and new controls. Man now knows more about his physical world than ever before. He has been allowed to tap the secret veins of nature, and is now voyaging both in space and outer space. Man has seen new visions and heard new sounds, and has at long last learned how to defy the law of gravitation. He has learned to master some of the secret forces of nature. Medical science has made use of much of this new knowledge.”

“In order that a man may reach the truth, two qualities are necessary. One is moral sense, earnestness of purpose, desire to do that which is true. The other is intellectual clearness, the ability to think straight.

Man’s efficiency in respect to truth is his moral purpose (or desire) plus his ability to think straight. Many men have the moral courage and desire to be true but lack the ability to understand what is the truth. Conversely, many know the truth but lack the moral courage to enact the same.”

“Now to consider our vision:

This can be shortly summed up by saying that our visions are the awak[en]ing of our minds to spiritual consciousness of the advantages, opportunities, and obligations that surround us.”

I dwell so long on these musings, because they seem to me to capture well the promise that you bring to this important work. I was pleased to learn that there is a long tradition of SCHEV staff participating actively in VIP, including but certainly not limited to Dr. Anderson’s current service on your board and Ms Bradford’s participation in this year’s senior seminar. I have strongly recommended to all of the staff at SCHEV the vital importance of ongoing personal growth and learning and the value of contributing to our overall profession through research and service. The Virginia Identification Program is a worthy venue for such professional development and contributions.

Dr. Carey kindly offered to me the opportunity to choose whatever topic I would for our conversation today. This gives me a timely chance to say a few words about SCHEV’s in-progress work on the Virginia Plan for higher education for 2000-02. The Code of Virginia charges SCHEV with the responsibility to update the plan biennially. In recent years, SCHEV’s Indicators series served to fulfill this mandate. For the 2000-02 Plan, we will take a different tack. I’d like to hear your reactions today to our planned direction and also hope you will offer me your thoughts on some of the broad goals we ought to consider including in this system-wide document. I think our discussions may also surface some ideas about a new, more flexible approach to planning as an overall process—ideas that may have relevance not only for the planning activities in which we engage in our professional lives but also for the shaping of our personal lives in this day and age (as my mother had envisioned in what she called “our vision”).

In her biography of five extraordinary women, *Composing a Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson suggests that “fluidity and discontinuity are central to the reality in which we live.” She recommends that in an environment of change and unpredictability we need a new way to understand and perhaps to guide our experiences—a new means by which we might give a sense of coherence to our lives. She offers us, as an example of one such means, “a book about life as an improvisatory art, about the ways we combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations, following an underlying grammar and an evolving aesthetic.”

Those of us who toil in the academy, both here in Virginia and nationally, might recognize a certain degree of “fluidity and discontinuity” as “central to the reality” of our institutional lives during the past decade. We also know that there is nothing that would suggest a slowing down of the pace and scope of change as we enter the next millennium. How then, in such an environment, might we go about constructing a rational, meaningful—perhaps even visionary—plan to guide higher education in Virginia during the first two years of that millennium?

Our planning task is not made any easier by the fact that there are many separate agents who will not only shape the plan, but even more tellingly, will have a hand in constructing the reality of higher education in Virginia as it unfolds in the years ahead. You know the players and something of their varied roles: the Governor; the General Assembly; the Boards of Visitors, administration, faculty, staff and students of our institutions; the ad hoc commissions that are appointed from time to time (at present, notably, the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission and the General Assembly's Joint Legislative Committee on Higher Education Funding Policies); as well as the Council itself.

How might we orchestrate the efforts of this multitude with any hope of composing a plan that promises some harmony and balance, a plan that inspires action, and not a plan long on fulsome rhetoric but short on substance?

Bateson offers some guidance on this question. We might start by conceiving of a plan that more resembles a jazz improvisation than a symphony. As Bateson writes, "Jazz exemplifies artistic ability that is at once individual and communal, performance that is both repetitive and innovative, each participant sometimes providing background support and sometimes flying free." As I envision the Virginia Plan for Higher Education for 2000-02, I imagine something like a galvanizing jazz composition. To be more precise, I foresee an innovative rendition of an old standard—something like Marcus Roberts' recent interpretation of Duke Ellington's "How Long Has This Been Going On?"

The underlying melody of the Plan for 2000-02 will almost certainly echo the familiar strains of "quality, access, and affordability," which have long been heard as the overarching themes of each biennial Virginia Plan. When the Council approved our own agency strategic plan this past fall, we once again ratified quality, access, and affordability as guiding principles. I expect these three broad aims to frame the statewide plan for 2000-02 as well.

Part of the excitement of jazz comes from the discordant fusion that gives it an edge. We recognize that there is some potential tension among the broad aims of quality, access, and affordability. Our constant striving, within SCHEV and within our colleges and universities, is to find a workable balance among these aims. Providing a top-quality education, regardless of the cost, may be a challenge, but it is a far greater challenge to deliver a top-quality education at an affordable cost. Likewise, we must be on guard to ensure that our critical efforts to keep college affordable do not degrade the quality of the education we offer Virginia's citizens. We aim for harmony and balance in our overall system. We want to make the inherent tension a source of creative energy.

I like a jazz metaphor for the emerging Virginia Plan, in part, because one of our chief goals in developing the Plan will be to free the institutions to play their singular notes in accord with their own inspiration and in tune with the aspirations set forth in their own individual mission. One of the hallmark strengths of higher education in Virginia—and, indeed, one of the reasons I accepted the position as director of SCHEV—is our effective combination of mission distinction and institutional autonomy within a framework of supportive coordination. We would soon tire of a jazz performance that offered only Artie Shaw on the clarinet, no matter the inventiveness of his lyricism. Even the still-fresh sound of Coltrane on the tenor sax might grow stale if heard only in isolation. Oscar Peterson's magnificently constructed solos are made still more pleasing when the rest of the trio joins back in. So, too, is the overall system of higher education in Virginia made not just aesthetically pleasing but also vastly more productive by the distinctiveness of our public and private colleges and universities.

At the same time that our aim, in developing the Virginia Plan, will be to preserve and strengthen the unique roles of each of the players, we also want to create a work wherein the varied individual notes blend to shape a coherent whole. I have two principal goals in mind as we articulate the Plan. I trust that

you will judge, as I do, that these two goals are not in contradiction, although they may sound as if they were to a less discerning listener.

My two principal goals are these:

First, to midwife the still fetal understanding of Virginia's colleges and universities (both public and private) as a system. My firm intention is for this system-wide perspective to inform the plan and also to serve as the stance for evaluating both the plan and its implementation.

My second aim, which I have already underscored, will be to free each institution to contribute to the accomplishment of system-wide goals in the manner that its Board, administration, and faculty find most in keeping with the unique mission of that institution. As I said to the presidents at a meeting earlier this week, SCHEV cannot predict the future, but we may be able to affect who it is that makes those critical decisions that will determine our future. I believe that the responsibility for those decisions is most appropriately placed on the shoulders of the Boards, administration, and faculty who have been entrusted with the governance of our colleges and universities. Thus, they must agree to undertake this responsibility soulfully, in an environment that mandates explicit and articulate performance before a broader public. Nothing so surely damns higher education than the familiar tendency to withdraw into baronial chambers of privilege and to address all others as so many unwashed herds. I ask, therefore, only that each college and university shape its decisions and its contributions to the system from a planning perspective that is "at once individual and communal." Our aim ought to be to achieve our system-wide goals through a protean synergy. Let us shape our institutional plans, as well as the Virginia Plan, with an understanding, as Bateson expresses it, "that there is a large whole to which all belong." Let us further acknowledge, with Bateson, that "the health of that larger whole is essential to the health of the parts."

I do not imagine that it will be an easy task to articulate a plan for higher education in Virginia of the sort that I've invoked—particularly by the April 20th deadline that we have set for ourselves. Nor do I anticipate that it will be easy to engender the degree of support for the plan that will be needed to put it into motion. One way I hope to engender that support is by inviting full participation throughout the process. And, the process we are using is one that starts by culling common themes, issues, and goals from the public institutions' own strategic plans.

As the Council approaches this task, we will be guided by these words of the virtuoso bassist and composer, Charlie Mingus: "Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity."

As we work in concert with numerous advisory groups, we will bend our creativity to quilting from the rich, complex patchwork of our colleges' and universities' own strategic plans a simple, yet compelling design for the system as a whole. Nor is it irrelevant that the quilting art composes out of the commonest elements, even rejects. We seek to articulate what Bateson calls "a vision worth fulfilling, not a demand for retrenchment and austerity." That is an "awak[en]ing of our minds to spiritual consciousness of the advantages, opportunities, and obligations that surround us."

At this stage in our process, the most vital component is the generation of concerns and input from interested and knowledgeable persons around the Commonwealth. We have already begun involving SCHEV's regular advisory groups (GPAC, IPAC, and FAC) in the development of the Plan and will continue to ask for their input and counsel. I've also invited a group of thirty individuals from a wide range of institutions to serve as a Strategic Planning Advisory Committee. Further, since the Plan we intend to develop will embrace the entire system of higher education in Virginia, not just the public institutions, I have also invited the presidents of the private institutions to participate. Opening the web of communication still wider, I intend to sponsor a series of regional forums to discuss a draft of the Plan in March. My

thinking at this point is to invite individuals from local communities, businesses, and school districts, as well as from the academy, to participate in these sessions.

I want to invite each of you to use the avenues I've just mentioned to offer us your thoughts on goals and issues to include in the Plan. But let's not pass by the opportunity we have today to initiate our own jam session. I'd like to ask you now to give me your impromptu ideas on the major issues that the Plan ought to address and perhaps even to lay forth some ambitious system-wide goals for us to consider.

As we develop our vision and put it into play, my hope is that we will challenge each other to aim as high as Ella's pure notes, to be as boldly inventive as Miles, and to pour our hearts, minds, and souls into the effort as fully and intentionally as Satchmo played his horn.