UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA
BOARD OF VISITORS
JOINT MEETING OF THE
STUDENT AFFAIRS AND ATHLETICS
AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY
COMMITTEES
FEBRUARY 25, 2011
JOINT MEETING OF THE STUDENT AFFAIRS AND
ATHLETICS COMMITTEE AND THE EDUCATIONAL
POLICY COMMITTEE

Friday, February 25, 2011
3:45 - 5:15 p.m.
Dome Room, The Rotunda

Student Affairs and Athletics Committee Members:
Robert D. Hardie, Chair
Stewart H. Ackerly
A. Macdonald Caputo
Susan Y. Dorsey
W. Heywood Fralin
Marvin W. Gilliam Jr.
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Mark J. Kington
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John O. Wynne, Ex-officio

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Helen E. Dragas
Marvin W. Gilliam Jr.
Sheila C. Johnson
Mark J. Kington
Randal J. Kirk
Austin Ligon
John O. Wynne, Ex-officio
Ann B. Hamric, Consulting Member

AGENDA

I. Alumni Panel Presentation on Understanding the
   Student Experience (Moderated by Mr. Stewart Ackerly)  1

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UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA
BOARD OF VISITORS AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

BOARD MEETING: February 25, 2011

COMMITTEES: Student Affairs and Athletics and Educational Policy

AGENDA ITEM: I. Alumni Panel on Understanding the Student Experience

ACTION REQUIRED: None

DISCUSSION: This panel presentation is intended to provide an understanding of those aspects of the U.Va. student experience that have a lasting impact on our alumni. The objective is to learn from alumni about the structures, opportunities, and expectations that shape the U.Va. student experience. It will also highlight themes that have characterized this unique experience, including those that have remained constant as well as those that have evolved as the University has grown. This information will provide helpful context as the Board prepares to make critical decisions affecting student life at the University.

The panelists hail from across four decades and represent different academic and extracurricular areas of involvement while undergraduates.

Mr. Timothy Ingrassia graduated from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1986, where he earned an interdisciplinary bachelor’s degree as part of the Echols Scholar program. While a student, Mr. Ingrassia was selected as the first undergraduate student member of the Board of Visitors. He is currently Head of North American Mergers and Acquisitions for Goldman Sachs, and he lives in New York City.

Ms. Cheryl Mills graduated from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1987, where she earned bachelor’s degrees in philosophy, religion, and economics. While a student, Ms. Mills was selected to serve as a Co-Chair of the Resident Staff Program. She is currently the Counselor and Chief of Staff, Department of State, and resides in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Alexander Park graduated from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1999, where he earned bachelor’s degrees in government and sociology. While a student, Mr. Park was elected
president of the Inter-Fraternity Council. He is currently the Director of CapTech Consulting and lives in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Larry Sabato graduated from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1974, where he earned his bachelor’s degree in the honors program in government and foreign affairs. While a student, Mr. Sabato was elected president of Student Council. He currently serves as University Professor and Robert Kent Gooch Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia and lives in Charlottesville.

Ms. Meghan Sullivan graduated from the College of Arts and Sciences in 2005, where she earned bachelor’s degrees in philosophy and government and foreign affairs. While a student, Ms. Sullivan was elected chair of the Honor Committee. She is currently a doctoral candidate in philosophy at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, and lives in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

The panel will be moderated by Mr. Stewart Ackerly, a 2006 graduate of the College of Arts and Sciences and third-year student in the School of Law. Mr. Ackerly currently serves as the student member of the Board of Visitors.
BOARD MEETING: February 25, 2011

COMMITTEES: Student Affairs and Athletics and Educational Policy

AGENDA ITEM: II. Understanding the Student Experience (Written Report)

ACTION REQUIRED: None

DISCUSSION: The following report summarizes a series of focus groups held to provide critical information to the Board of Visitors about what makes the U.Va. student experience unique, as the Board plans for potential enrollment growth.
UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE
A PROJECT FOR THE BOARD OF VISITORS
STUDENT AFFAIRS AND ATHLETICS AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY COMMITTEES

Goal: The purpose of this project was to provide critical information to the Board of Visitors about what makes the U.Va. student experience unique, as the Board plans for potential enrollment growth.

Approach

Format: Five 90-minute focus groups of 9-15 students were held on a Friday afternoon (1/28/2011) on the Grounds. Focus groups were facilitated by staff members and note-takers recorded general themes and comments in the conversation. The groups were also audio-recorded.

Population: Students were identified through involvement and academic recognition, with effort made to gather students whose experiences represented excellence across those dimensions representing the core values of the Division of Student Affairs: academic rigor, student self-governance, honor, diversity and multiculturalism, and public service.

Fifty-six students participated. All four undergraduate years were represented, with 3rd and 4th year students making up the majority of participants. Two graduate students participated. Eight schools were represented: ARCH, BATT, CLAS, COMM, Curry, Law, SEAS, and the SON. Slightly more women than men participated. The racial/ethnic profile of the group roughly reflected that of the University, with African-American students slightly over-represented.

Results are provided only in aggregate, meaning no personally identifiable information is included. Students were instructed that we were interested in their perceptions of their experiences and were encouraged to be candid and honest about what has worked for them, as well as what challenges they may have experienced as a student.

Questions: The following questions were asked in each group:

1. How would you describe your academic experience at U.Va? (note: if needed, ask specifically about interactions with faculty or advisors).
2. What are you involved with in or out of the classroom that matters to you or that has been particularly meaningful?  
   • Who, if anyone, has helped you in this experience?  
3. In what ways, if any, has public service been part of your time as a student?  
   • What have you specifically pursued?  
4. In what ways, if any, do you feel like you’ve been exposed to perspectives different from your own?  
   • In what settings did that exposure occur?  
   • What is your opinion of the University’s diversity efforts? What, specifically, informs that opinion?  
5. Tell me about your experience with the value of honor at U.Va. — and here I mean “little h” honor as it relates to ethical decision making, ethical conduct and integrity.  
6. You have all had leadership experiences while you’ve been here. What do you consider to be essential characteristics or traits of good leadership?  
   • How has the University helped or hindered your development as a leader?  
7. What have been the most critical resources that have supported your student experience?  
8. We know that you have competing priorities and limited time as a student. How do you prioritize?  
9. What has made your experience as a student especially positive or not so positive so far?  
10. Any final thoughts?  

Results

Summary

Overall, students agree that the U.Va. experience is unique. Challenging, rigorous academic work is central and is of the highest quality when characterized by small class size, strong relationships with faculty, access to research and service opportunities, and connections to “real world” issues. Students must make the effort to reach out to faculty, but when they do so faculty are responsive.

Extracurricular involvement is expected and important in the experience, and provides significant levels of autonomy and responsibility that students elsewhere do not get. The University environment is seen as competitive, which has positive and negative components. Peer support is unusually high here and is seen as important to navigating the University environment. Exposure to different perspectives comes largely in the first year through the residence halls and then is
subject to individual effort. Honor is an important part of the U.Va. experience and sets us apart, but perceptions vary with regard to its definition and effect across the University. Public service is experienced largely as community service, but some go beyond that definition through programs such as Jefferson Public Citizens.

Students worry quite a lot that the excellence and unique character of their experience is threatened by potential enrollment growth.

**Academics & Faculty Interaction**

Students see their academics as central to the student experience. Academic work here is perceived as challenging, engaging and rigorous. There was strong consensus that smaller classes are key to having positive student experience, that it makes students feel as though they have a place at the University and can navigate the larger environment. They worry that this component of the experience is at risk with enrollment growth. Big classes were a major concern, particularly in the sciences. A few defended large lectures if delivered well.

Feeling connected to faculty is particularly important, as students perceive those connections as creating community, providing access to research opportunities, and making the experience intimate rather than anonymous. They phrased it as making the difference between “feeling lost” and feeling connected. Several noted the “take a professor to lunch” program provided some of their most memorable experiences. Interaction with faculty outside of the classroom through events, seminars, etc., was important, and provided opportunities to learn different things, to make connections outside “the UVA bubble.”

Small group work and research provided opportunities to deepen learning but also to develop “real world” skills like teamwork, time management, and relationship building. The Echols Scholar program was noted as creating “a community of scholars.”

There was a strong perception that students need to make the effort when it comes to academics – to learn about majors, research and other opportunities, to build relationships with faculty, to make connections. Faculty will not seek students out in this way, but they are receptive and generous with their time when a student reaches out.
Peer-to-peer support was reported to be very important. Several students commented that older students were critical to their academic success – in the classroom to help those struggling but also to navigate the system and opportunities.

Interdisciplinary majors seem to facilitate good faculty interaction, more engagement with the community, strong peer relationships, and opportunities for research.

There was consensus that advising in the early years was not very strong and was dependent on the advisor. Students reported regular reliance on peers in this area.

Some see gaps in the curriculum – faculty stretched too thin, not enough connection between topics and issues.

Overall, the academic experience is defined by interaction with faculty members and creating a small-community feel. The small community feel, in turn, strengthens the student experience.

**Involvement & Leadership**

Students agreed that U.Va. provides leadership opportunities that are unique and that make the student experience special. Those opportunities are meaningful and appreciated – Hullabahoos or Honor & UJC, class councils, being an RA – these are defining experiences for students. They feel trusted with money and decisions, and they feel this sets us apart. Many students find themselves in leadership positions after coming up through the ranks of being a general member. “Growing through an organization” as a leadership ladder was cited as valuable in developing strong leaders. Relationships – particularly “friends” – are important to successful leadership, and mentorship was noted as a strong component of the quality of these experiences.

Students recognize they are given an extraordinary level of independence, autonomy, decision-making, and control as part of their involvement. These experiences have proven valuable in interviews for graduate school and jobs. Specific skill sets developed include managing a budget, selecting and training a staff, and holding members accountable. They also report that this involvement provides preparation for the work world, develops teamwork, social networks and community. This involvement helps students “learn by doing,” build meaningful
relationships with peers, faculty and administrators, and engage in things about which they are passionate.

"UVA does a great job of letting you choose your level of engagement."

"Students hold students accountable. It’s not an administrator saying I can’t believe you didn’t show up. It’s your friend holding you accountable. It helps make folks want to participate more—being held accountable by their peers (talking about Madison House)."

Students recognize that our model allows them to make mistakes, which can be challenging but allows them to learn. One student describes it as "Autonomy with a safety net."

Although not directly stated, self-governance was a theme throughout all the responses. Students indicated that they were engaged in experiences that professionals at other institutions would normally perform, that they were empowered to make decisions, to learn from mistakes, and to manage budgets.

Students pointed to individual organizations as providing particularly meaningful experiences (e.g., Resident Staff, University Judiciary Committee, Honor, the University Programs Council, Orientation Leaders, Class Councils, Greek letter organizations). They reported access to a broader scope of the University through these avenues, as well as meaningful connections with administrators.

Students noted that the environment can be competitive. This competitiveness was seen as both positive and negative. While it encourages them to challenge themselves, some feel it feeds the “checklist” and “everyone try to be a particular kind of leader” mentality. They recognize that these opportunities supported by the University are limited and competitive; the competitiveness will only increase with size.

Students argued for a conception of leadership that encompasses both leadership and followership; they want more listening to one another; and many expressed a sense that one’s need to be in charge limits effectiveness and leads to recreating the wheel. The multiple student organizations with overlapping missions were given as an example.

Many report the need for more “connection” of activities and academics to career.
Students feel the tension between academics and activities. They expressed a need to balance, and once they know how to manage the academics, they can prioritize activities more. They prioritize what they are getting the most from, which can change, but most said it was their activities. At the end of the day, most reported that they were still willing to let their academics slip for other things—friends, activities, responsibilities. Echols and pre-med were exceptions to this pattern.

Students noted some limitations of the current model of involvement, particularly that university support does not always reach everyone. Some reported a general concern that the university is not equitably supporting organizations/students who aren’t really involved, that there are those who are left out of the leadership experience, either because they’re not in the “chosen” organizations or because they don’t join at all, particularly if they have to work. Concern exists about how to engage the entire community, and they worry that growth will make that harder. Some worry that leadership can be just “checking a box.”

A few expressed a desire for more resources, including space, money and access to administrators and faculty.

The Jefferson Public Citizens program was mentioned as a great setting for leadership development.

This dimension—involvement—raised perhaps the highest levels of concern about the effect of growth on the quality and quantity of those experiences and the ability of student self-governance to survive the growth. One student noted, “we already have 233 Lawn applications, I can’t imagine reading 500—really strains self-governance—res life is where you are already seeing cracks; it’s what makes us unique and we are losing it.”

They worry about the loss of the ability to form relationships with peers and faculty in larger environment.

**Mentorship**

In virtually every facet of the student experience, from academics to adjustment to involvement, students report that their peers, first those who are older and then those of the same year, are crucial in helping them make connections, discover opportunities, and navigate this place. They have a strong fear of that changing, getting harder as the place grows.
Honor

Honor is still very much perceived to be central to the U.Va. student experience and something that sets us apart. However, there is some divergence in students’ experience with and understanding of honor. Some report a strong sense that Honor (e.g., the Honor Committee and its policies and practices) and honor (e.g., integrity and ethical conduct) are intertwined, creating a unique environment of trust, ethical interaction, accountability to one’s peers, and meaningful experiences. Others see Honor as getting in the way of honor due to its perceived emphasis on punishment, on a "mythical sense that UVA is different," and in its omission of things students feel should fall under its aegis, such as respect, sexual assault, drug use, or hate crimes. Some perceive the single sanction as reducing U.Va.’s sense of honor. Several urged that we need to “Get Honor out of its 'little box.'” Others reported that interaction with Honor provided amazing experience – exposes students to every emotion, but creates very strong people. “Nothing like it.”

Regardless of students’ opinion on H/honor, there is a strong sense that it makes the U.Va. experience unique. There is still regular association with being able to leave things around without fear they will be stolen.

Public Service

Public service is largely defined and experienced by students as community service, with Madison House serving as the major vehicle, but also including organization-level service (APO, 100+ service organizations, etc.). Broader understanding that includes academic work and more in-depth engagement with communities is facilitated through particular schools/majors (Nursing, Global Development) and the Jefferson Public Citizens program.

Some students describe a shift in their perception of service – from resume building to an opportunity to apply classroom experience in real world, to get outside of the “UVA bubble”, to make broader impact.
“T’ve stayed in touch with reality through public service. It gives me a better real world vision—outside of the U.Va. bubble. A social contract I have to abide by. Purpose through service. It makes me think about the real world, to stay connected, to stay grounded.”
"I didn’t realize the bubble until I went on clinical work for nursing school; to see living conditions of folks in Cville was eye-opening. The things we do matter, but we tend to ignore needs to Charlottesville." They note that service is “huge in exposing us to diversity.”

Students highlighted that there is a learning component to service that translates into a more meaningful experience. Once they were able to identify this component as central to service, they indicated a stronger connection and affinity towards public service. Also, students readily identified that communities were affected by service and one needs to be mindful of the community they are working with.

Students value service, and have strong opinions on the “right” ways and reasons for doing it. They perceive a tension between being philanthropic and receiving credit for that service.

**Diversity & Multiculturalism**

When it comes to learning from different perspectives, students report that there are a few structures that help put diversity in place, but it’s the organic student-to-student interactions that really solidify diversity in their experience. Broad consensus exists that first-year dorms are the major — sometimes only — setting where exposure to diverse perspectives takes place. That experience is seen as quite positive, and some yearn for more in the later years, but recognize that students separate into their communities, often by comfort zone, as they move through the University. However, some students describe very concerted efforts to get out of those comfort zones, of conscious seeking of different perspectives and experiences. They expressed concern about how to encourage that work in “Joe Wahoo.”

There was about an even split on whether CIOs offer diversity of perspectives or allow one to remain in one’s comfort zone. Classes are another source of exposure to diverse perspectives, including travel abroad. As noted earlier, service is also effective in this area:

“I have a little sibling through Madison House. I’m the same age as his Mom. It helps me step outside of UVA and realize UVA is not the real world.”
Several noted that UVa is a university of thinkers; those students want to see more action. They perceive the University as a place that is slow to change.

They made a couple of suggestions for a university-wide experience in the first year, such as common reading or a class.

Students voiced strong concern that growth will increase the homogeneity (white students from NOVA) rather than increase diversity. They asked that we make sure growth adds to diversity rather than homogeneity.

Critical resources

Mentors, RAs, professors, academic deans, student affairs staff (Office of the Dean of Students & VPSA), Alumni Hall staff, UCS, fraternities, Dining Services ("those folks are there every day, make your life go smoother, they are helpful, deserve a lot of credit"), the Office of African-American Affairs, the LGBT Resource Center, the Student Activities Fund, and the Nursing School all were mentioned as critical to students' success. There was also a sense that the level of peer support here is unique. One student noted that University support of the arts was critically important - "That people take me seriously and care about the art that I'm creating and what I'm writing is huge."

There was recognition that some students have access to a different world in terms of resources - e.g., the distinction between UCS & COMM school resources seem enormous to them. Students noted a perception of the the "haves and have-nots" in this regard. Not all small schools are perceived as "haves," as students from the Architecture School noted they had nothing like McIntire's career resources. These distinctions also emerged in reference to some of the smaller academic programs, such as African-American Studies. Even students in the McIntire School acknowledged these distinctions in access to specialized resources.