April 30, 2013

President Teresa Sullivan  
University of Virginia

Dear President Sullivan:

We are pleased to deliver this first draft of our strategic assessment of the University of Virginia, undertaken in service to the strategic planning process in which the University has been simultaneously engaged.

As affirmed by the prominent observers of higher education with whom we spoke and evidenced in the multiple measurement sources we studied, the University of Virginia stands among a small group of the nation’s premier and most highly esteemed institutions of higher learning. Many of those observers described the University of Virginia as possessing invaluable and differential strengths critical to the future of higher education.

In this assessment we have focused somewhat less on elaborating that widely acknowledged position of strength and leadership, and comparatively more on highlighting the competitive challenges and threats that face the University of Virginia at a time of multiple stresses and intense competition in public higher education. You asked us to explore those areas of institutional life where the University of Virginia might be unfocused, lagging the competition, or failing to take advantage of opportunities. Our report provides that more critical view.

We appreciate that you and your colleagues urged such an assessment and are taking the results into account as you set strategic direction for the University.

Sincerely,

Benjamin G. Edwards       J. Craig Goebel  
Principal                   Principal
Part 1: Executive Summary

In concert with a strategic planning process at the University of Virginia, Art & Science Group was tasked with conducting an assessment of UVA relative to its institutional goals and the environment in which it operates. Our work comprised an examination of internal and external data and documents; interviews with UVA deans, department chairs, senior administrators, and board members; examination of strategic priorities at nine comparison universities selected by UVA; and interviews with higher education thought-leaders and senior officials at the comparison universities.

These distinguished leaders and observers consistently characterized the present as an “inflection point” for higher education. A leading public university, in particular, confronts “a broken business plan,” finding every one of its revenue sources stressed; fierce competition for outstanding faculty against better-funded private institutions at a time of mass retirements; technological innovations that may be leading to a revolution in how colleges teach and deliver education, juxtaposed with a greater-than-ever need for top students to gain what only a rich residential education can provide; heightened expectations to innovate, help solve social and environmental problems, and operate more efficiently, with measurable results; flawed governance; and the real possibility that its fortunes could rise or fall sharply, depending on the choices that it makes.

In this environment, even a prestigious university is routinely advised to build on its comparative advantages, not to imagine that it can do everything well or thrive where competitors already have built a significant lead. The University of Virginia is almost uniformly understood to begin with a true and singular advantage: a superior, extraordinarily valued undergraduate experience in which many highly engaged students take unusual responsibility for their educational experience. UVA is seen to have complementary advantages as well: a distinctive shared culture among faculty and students, leadership in areas of the humanities and social sciences, outstanding professional schools which also notably value the student experience, and an unusual mid-size that creates opportunity for exceptional teaching and learning.

The criticisms leveled most frequently at UVA are that it has been comparatively complacent, slow to insist on evidenced-based strategies, and indecisive about its direction at a time when other universities, both leading and lower-tier, have aggressively pursued every facet of institution-building. Research funding has not kept pace, faculty quality is seen as less strong than it should be, political pressures to keep tuition low have meant tuition revenues have not been optimized, and fundraising, while robust, has left strategic priorities unaddressed.

Strategic planning presents an opportunity for decisiveness, and this round of planning comes at an opportune time. UVA’s core strengths and distinctions favor it in a higher education environment that rewards outstanding student experiences, already-established research and
scholarly strengths on which to build, and clear differentiation. And, if for reasons it would not have wished, UVA finds itself in the national spotlight, creating an unparalleled opportunity to assert in a very public way what it stands for and where it is headed. Observers see UVA’s problems as both unique and representative of the problems faced by many universities, and both internal and external constituents are anxious to see how UVA responds, including in this strategic planning effort.

Rather than emulate other research universities, our assessment suggests that UVA would gain greatest comparative advantage through a strategy rooted in a bold recommitment to its counter-trending greatness as a collegiate research university—focused on students’ academic-residential experience, extensive interaction with teaching faculty, and development of leadership qualities, skills, and motivation. UVA would do well to protect its core advantage vigorously and indeed to invest further in aspects of the residential experience to remain competitive and to ensure that a high percentage of UVA students partake in the full experience. In particular, UVA could claim leadership development—notably, the preparation of imaginative, scientifically literate, globally educated, public-service-oriented future leaders—as a major institutional focus and reason for continued investment in residential education.

UVA would also do well to embrace and lead the significant changes happening in pedagogy and the student experience—in ways that build on UVA’s distinctive institutional values and strengths across multiple schools. As it joins many others in considering the means of educational delivery, UVA should lead in rethinking the content of an undergraduate education today and the path through advising, experiential learning, and other forms of engagement that students take to develop “useful knowledge” for this era.

UVA will be best-served to position itself as a research institution but not aspire to become a research-driven institution. This will mean reinvesting in UVA’s historic areas of leadership in the humanities and social sciences, while also sustaining and developing strong offerings in carefully selected, highly focused areas in the sciences. It will also mean more vigorous interdisciplinary collaboration across departments, programs, and schools. It will mean continuing to focus graduate and professional school resources even further on programs of national prominence.

Many in the University of Virginia community see UVA as facing an inflection point of its own. They admit to being deflated by cuts and controversy yet at the same time ready, behind decisive leadership and strategic investment, to release enormous pent-up energy for revitalization and renewal. UVA can thrive by making clear, strategic choices and reasserting a proud, vital, accountable culture and commitment to academic leadership.