Executive Summary

Public Service and Outreach Commission Report
Fall 2000

For its purposes, the commission focused primarily on academic service, defining it as “the application of scholarly knowledge and professional expertise to the health, economic, educational, civic, and environmental needs of the public.” In the course of its work, the commission identified four areas of weakness:

1. The University lacks clear priorities for public service and outreach.
2. It does not partner with the public as effectively as it could.
3. The University has not articulated a clear commitment to public service and outreach.
4. Many of the University’s contributions to public life go unnoticed and uncelebrated.

The commission made seven recommendations:

1: Focus and apply our expertise in high-priority areas of public interest. The University can make a marked difference in our communities—local to global—in five priority areas: K-12 education and lifelong learning, civic engagement and public policy, economic and business development, the environment (both planned and natural), and health.

The best example of a major issue of public concern is K-12 education. Each year, through the work of hundreds of faculty in over 70 departments, UVa provides direct service to over 45,000 teachers and students throughout the Commonwealth. In order to be more responsive to the needs of the Commonwealth and to strengthen our institutional commitment to this area of great public interest, K-12 outreach projects throughout our ten schools should be coordinated and publicized through the Office of the Vice President for Research and Public Service as a discrete, high-priority area. A University-wide committee should oversee K-12 outreach activities and promote our efforts to obtain joint funding for this work from federal, state, and private sources.

2: Establish regional and local structures to facilitate outreach partnerships, such as regional outreach councils, the proposed comprehensive NEH South Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, and the collaborative Connected Community.

3: Demonstrate institutional commitment by elevating public service in UVa’s academic culture. All schools would be expected to develop and implement a mechanism for formal recognition of public service activities according to their needs, their strengths, and their mission. Opportunities for endowed chairs and sabbaticals should reward excellence in public service activity. Public service should be prominent in the criteria for evaluating
faculty performance. A competitive process should be established to solicit faculty proposals for new public service initiatives, with funding available for the best proposals.

4: Demonstrate institutional commitment by integrating service-learning into student academic life. In its continuing commitment to undergraduate education, the University can reflect its founder's vision by heightening the civic responsibility and social awareness of students through service-learning that allows them to make connections between field-based application theories and the perspectives gained in their coursework and research. Two strategies are suggested to enable the University to provide service-learning opportunities for all undergraduate and graduate students.

5: Demonstrate institutional commitment and increase visibility through better coordination and support for student, staff, and faculty volunteer service. Current data suggest that we have the greatest degree of volunteerism per person of any University in this country, and that the many community volunteer activities undertaken by UVa students, staff, faculty and alumni are defining features of our University's culture. Additional resources and administrative support are recommended for Madison House and other community volunteer activities.

6: Increase Visibility by Aligning Administrative and Financial Resources to Reflect the University's Commitment to Public Service and Outreach. We need a strong champion within the senior administration at UVa, a person who is visible, directly involved in public service activities, and has both external and internal credibility. Within the next year as an immediate, interim step, the commission recommends an associate vice president be appointed in the Office of the Vice President for Research and Public Service. This office will need a supporting infrastructure - both personnel and financial - with organizational links to deans' offices and the provost. As public service at UVa becomes more visible and responsive, a vice president position should be created within three to five years. The commission further recommends that the University reassess the funding model for the School of Continuing and Professional Studies.

7: Demonstrate institutional commitment by increasing visibility of and access to outreach at UVa. A new state-of-the-art facility should serve as an orientation and citizen referral center, a conference center, a research location for those addressing public service issues, a gathering place, and a location for the administrative apparatus necessary to coordinate this institution's public service mission. Provide sustained staff and funding support for Outreach Virginia, the University's interactive guide to public service programs at UVa. Develop a strategic communications plan building on a consistent theme and visual message for the institution's public service contributions. Hold local and regional summits concerning public service at a variety of locations throughout the Commonwealth.