

“LET'S MAKE IT HAPPEN”

Address by
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Good evening. It's a pleasure to talk with you this evening. Given the lateness of the hour, I'll aim for brevity in my remarks, especially since you'll be hearing from some of SCHEV's real statistical experts tomorrow and Tuesday - Dot Bryant and Karen Bernhard. Of course, you've all heard the definition of an expert, haven't you? An expert is someone who is called in at the last minute to share the blame. And you may need an expert after you've heard from a statistician. As we know, a statistician is someone who can go directly from an unwarranted assumption to a preconceived conclusion. But, I assure you that SCHEV's statistical experts match neither of those definitions. Most of you already know Dot and Karen and realize what wonderful resources they are for information and advice about IPEDS and other forms of data reporting torture. I'm very pleased to have them both as members of the SCHEV team.

It has been said that there are three types of people: Those who make things happen; those who stand by and watch things happen; and those who wonder what happened. I am betting that you are in first category. My chief goal this evening is to muster your support in trying to make certain changes happen within Virginia's system of higher education. We, at SCHEV, consider each of you to be important members of our overall team. Collaboration has been, and will continue to be, the watchword for getting things done.

Even though we are all people who make things happen, there are times when we, nonetheless, find ourselves scratching our heads and asking, "what just happened?" We're not alone in this bewilderment. As we look back on the experience of higher education nationally and within Virginia over the past decade, the general public, policy analysts, and legislators - as well as educators - are all asking, "What happened?"

As we know, a lot happened - some good, some not so good. I'd like to direct our attention to one unfortunate thing that happened - an erosion of the general public's trust in our systems of education, including higher education.

We are all too familiar with the factors that have contributed to this fraying of the public trust. They include, but are not limited to:

- Skyrocketing tuition inflation;
- Cost increases that continue to outpace the Consumer Price Index;
- Tuition discounting utilized as a strategic enrollment tool;
- A small, but widely publicized, number of instances of questionable institutional

practices, such as the Stanford indirect cost accounting extravagances and the overlap group's calculations that precipitated an investigation by the Justice Department;

- Concern within and outside the academy about large class size, use of graduate student instructors, and perceived imbalance between research and teaching in faculty merit systems; and,
- Vocal complaints from some employers about college graduates who do not have the knowledge and skills the employers expect.

What I'd like to discuss with you this evening is not what has caused this diminution of trust, but rather, what we can do about it. Better still, let's discuss what we will do about it. There are at least three areas in which the work of VAMAP's members will be critical helping SCHEV to rebuild trust in Virginia's institutions:

1. First, developing new, more informative ways to measure and articulate the "quality" of the education offered by each of Virginia's colleges and universities;
2. Second, developing more useful and consistent ways to describe various aspects of both the cost and the price of a college education; and
3. Third, continuing through restructuring and other approaches to control the rate of increase in the cost of a college education.

I think we have a valuable, existing tool that we can use more effectively than we did this year to help us work on each of these three areas. That tool is the Consolidated Report, which the General Assembly has mandated each of the public institutions to submit. I want to offer a few comments this evening on areas where we might, collaboratively, transform and strengthen the reporting process. I want to hear your suggestions as well.

First, however, I want to say a few words about the overall condition and usefulness of the Consolidated Reports that SCHEV received this October. If you'd like a more in-depth analysis of these reports, you can consult the Agenda Book for the November 17 Council meeting, which is posted on SCHEV's website. A copy of SCHEV's compilation of the Consolidated Reports, along with our commentary, is included in the agenda book.

The reporting process this year asked institutions to combine several reporting processes that had previously been done separately into one—restructuring, strategic planning, and assessment. This consolidation was done both in order to reduce the reporting burden on the institutions and also to provide a more comprehensive, informative overview of Virginia's colleges and universities in a single package. At the Council's meeting the day after tomorrow, they will consider how well the Consolidated Reports achieved the intended purposes and will also decide what recommendations to make for future reports. I have already begun a conversation with the presidents and provosts to ask for their evaluation of the process and suggestions for improvement. I will work closely with the institutions to refine and improve this instrument.

Ideally, the reporting process should serve the needs and purposes of the institutions, as well as those of the external audiences. The report process should engage the campus in thoughtful reflection on where it is coming from, where it is at this point in time, and where it wants to go from here. The reports serve a narrow purpose indeed, and would be a questionable undertaking altogether, if the campuses merely view them as an externally imposed requirement to be checked off once completed. The reporting process is most useful when it triggers a campus-wide engagement with important issues facing the institutions individually and collectively. And I underscore "collectively," for

the educational leaders on our campuses must accept their responsibility to provide policy leadership for the Commonwealth as a whole. The SCHEV-mandated restrictions on the length of the report and the attempt to merge three separate processes into one may have backfired. These factors contributed to what appears to be a trend this year for institutions to tackle the report as a “check-off” exercise, rather than a meaningful component in the institution’s overall process for planning and evaluation. A few institutions submitted reports that offer a useful look at progress on institutional and state initiatives; in other cases, it is hard to gain much insight about the institution from the report itself.

I’d like to enlist your help in thinking about ways to revamp and revitalize the process, so that it will be one that advances planning and evaluation at the campus while also meeting statewide goals. In particular, I’d like to focus our consideration this evening around the three areas I mentioned before - measuring quality, reliably reporting cost and price to our publics, and controlling cost increases.

Measuring Quality

You know as well as I do that colleges and universities across the country tend to gauge the quality of the institution in two ways—based on reputation and based on growth. We as educators may decry the rankings published by *U.S. News & World Report*, *Kiplinger’s*, *Money Magazine*, and others, but when an institution is ranked highly, that ranking is soon featured prominently in its recruiting materials. Students and their families certainly rely on these rankings as a major factor in choosing a college. As Peter Ewell noted in *Change* this summer, “[these] media initiatives fill an obvious gap in public information that, despite its abundant ‘expertise,’ the academy has done little to alleviate.”

Ewell suggests that it is time for the academy to develop further, more informative, and more appropriate tools than reputational rankings to offer quality assurance to our publics. I agree.

The other way we have tended to measure quality is by growth. Throughout much of these United States, open-ended, infinitely expanding enrollment has become the very soul of the large, research university, and particularly the public university. There, productivity is far more routinely measured by growth in numbers—matriculants and dollars—than by any other factor. As comprehensive universities emulate research universities, many have also come to value growth - in enrollment, faculty, programs, and facilities - as the benchmark of success.

Growth, alone, is an inadequate yardstick and even poses an obstacle to success in other important areas. A superior measure of success is an institution’s capacity for change—the constant refinement of procedures, resources, and facilities that is the only true path to excellence. Quality of academic life, rather than quantity of academic life, ought be our paramount concern.

I have asked the staff at SCHEV to explore new ways to measure and describe the quality of the education available at Virginia’s colleges and universities. This exploration can only be done in collaboration with the institutions themselves. Virginia will know that it is making progress when its institutions begin to take more pride in the accomplishments of their students than in the numbers of their students.

The consolidated reports might serve as one important mechanism (but not the only mechanism) through which SCHEV could report to the general public about measures that demonstrate the quality of education at our public colleges and universities. Other mechanisms will also be needed, especially since there could be real value in developing a set of reliable quality indicators that would be shared by both the public and the private institutions.

Straight Talk About Cost and Price

In its report, *Straight Talk about College Costs and Prices*, the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education stressed that the American public is both anxious about and confused by the cost of higher education. The confusion arises, in part, from the difference between cost and price and between total price and net price. The Commission recommended a series of steps that colleges and universities, as well as relevant state and national organizations, should take to provide clear, comprehensive, and reliable information on cost and price.

Here at home, we need to consider what actions we can take to end this confusion within the Commonwealth, while also acknowledging the reality that we need to comply with national data collection standards. The work of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission and the Legislative Joint Subcommittee on Higher Education Funding Policies will assist in identifying and evaluating courses of action.

I hope you will also spend some time during your conference exploring the contribution you can make to resolve this dilemma. One of the great things to be achieved in doing so is finally to make clear to folk everywhere exactly what relation, if any, there is between cost and quality in higher education.

Efforts to Control Cost Increases

The question of how we can best control cost increases at Virginia's colleges and universities has received much attention this year, in part because of the work of the two commissions I just mentioned. It would be a shame and a waste if in this hour we did not move beyond the platitudes of "more money," on the one side, and "more savings," on the other. Every informed observer must know that the path to better education is rather a conversation about what makes education a public good and not just a useful tool. So we should begin right now to rescue our conversation about education from the green eyeshades, the folk who imagine that you should care more about your books than about assuring that students have books.

It is no more true that public financial support for education is declining than it is true that we can reasonably expect legislators to move into a period of economic downturn with a focus on lifting the tuition freeze at our public institutions. We can ask for a commitment to guarantee our campuses appropriation increases at the level of inflation plus an increment for merit (what I call stable, long-term, progressive funding). But we can do so only if we provide a conversation that illuminates the issues that concern us. And, we can do so only if we can develop accounting methods that give us real insight into the costs. How much does a degree actually cost at this or that institution? We in the business certainly know that it varies from one institution to the next. So why cannot we and the public know the actual variation? VAMAP's members have a significant contribution to make in this effort by exploring innovative ways to capture and report expenditure data that will improve our understanding of these costs. We need to have a solid grasp of the costs before we can have any hope of succeeding in controlling them. Developing that improved understanding will entail looking at definitions across institutions at some level of detail. For example, do our institutions define "instructional faculty" in the same way? We do not, after all, want to adopt the stance of the novice lawyer, who concluded his prosecution by saying, "And those, members of the jury, are the conclusions on which I base my facts."

If you hear a sense of urgency in my voice as I recommend these actions, you are hearing me correctly. At this point, we have only seen a small chipping away at the public's trust in higher edu-

cation, which still rests on a firm foundation. Most Virginians appreciate the value that our colleges and universities add to the lives of individuals and to our society. Most Virginians realize that when you compare the cost of education to the return on the investment, it is a sound investment. And, most Virginians are proud of the outstanding quality of our colleges and universities and of the students who attend them.

But, Virginians are asking questions about cost and accountability—questions that we must answer without delay. We don't want to find ourselves in the predicament of the small boy who rushed breathlessly up to the train platform just as the last car pulled away. A man standing nearby observed the incident and said sympathetically, "I guess you did not run fast enough." The boy responded, "Oh, yes I did. I just didn't start soon enough."

Let's start right now to answer some of the questions I've raised. Through our collaborative discussions, research, and action, I know we can make needed changes happen.