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The Virginian Pilot

February 8, 1999

AIMING HIGH FOR VIRGINIA COLLEGES

Byline: DANNY AXSOM, THOMAS M. SHERMAN, EDWARD L. AYERS, ESTHER N. ELSTUN and L. TERRY OGGEL

Considerable discussion about higher education is likely to take place throughout 1999 from the current legislative session through December, when the report of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education is anticipated.

Because faculty teach, conduct research and provide service to all Virginians, we have a unique perspective on what will be needed to ensure the continuing excellence of higher education in Virginia. Toward that end, we offer the observations below on funding practices, simplifying bureaucratic procedures, improving research and scholarship, and governance in higher education.

We believe positive change can make real differences in the quality of the services and programs we provide.

Virginia must have stable, dependable and appropriate funding for higher education. A firm commitment should be made to meet two goals:

First, reduce the cost of tuition and fees for students and their families. We endorse the progress made to reduce tuition and support returning to Virginia's traditional policy of assuming 70 percent of the cost of a college education with tuition covering the remaining 30 percent.

Second, we must build and renovate facilities to be "world class." Doing so will require the state to recognize the dynamic nature of modern scholarship and teaching and to appropriate resources responsively. Equipment, materials and facilities become obsolete much more quickly than in the past. It is also a fact of life that reducing tuition does not improve facilities. We must invest in both.

Virginia must recognize that higher education today is very different than it was 20 and even 10 years ago. Community colleges and universities are far-reaching, interdependent institutions that do as much outside their campus boundaries as within.

We in higher education have become major participants in state and community economic development, social activities, K-12 education, business support services, agriculture and human resource development. These outreach activities are integral to the education we provide our students.

Many of the policies and procedures that have been in place for decades no longer appropriately guide our endeavors. Institutions must be released from bureaucratic reporting and procedures that stifle

initiative and delay responsiveness. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia has begun the modernization process. The overhaul of the labyrinth of regulations should be continued and broadened.

A renaissance of confidence in scholarship is needed. If Virginia is to lead, we must know more.

Success in the knowledge culture will require people who are well-educated, not just technically competent. Second, we must invest heavily in the people and the conditions that produce knowledge. A major policy shift is needed for Virginia to create strong support for graduate study and scholarly exploration.

Virginia must have full and representative participation of its faculty and citizens in deciding the policies and processes that guide our institutions.

Faculty must be full participants on the boards and committees that are responsible for the programs and finances of our colleges. Citizens who can provide broad and informed representation from all walks of life must be included on boards of visitors so that our colleges can have genuine Virginia and world perspectives.

We believe these suggestions will help to realize the vision of continuing excellence that all Virginians hold for our colleges.

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