



**REMARKS BEFORE THE EDUCATION SUBCOMMITTEE
OF THE COMMONWEALTH'S SENATE FINANCE AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE**

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January 18, 2024

Good afternoon. Thank you Madame Chair and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to be here and speak with you today as the chair of Virginia's Council of Presidents. It is a particular privilege to appear before you in this history-making year for the General Assembly and in your elegant new building, a fitting home for doing the people's business.

Higher education, of course, has been in the news perhaps more so than usual in recent months, as broader trends and crosscurrents drive events and debate. We are fortunate to be here in the Commonwealth of Virginia, where higher education continues to enjoy broad public and bipartisan support. Thanks to your strong support and leadership, higher education in Virginia continues to thrive.

Today I would like to touch briefly on two practical areas of public policy for your consideration. First, how state funding coupled with institutional initiatives drives college affordability. And second, the importance of internships for students.

Regarding affordability, all of us have a part to play. As college and university presidents, we must continue to exercise the prudent fiscal decision-making that has been top of mind for each of us especially through the challenges of recent years. A combination of strategic hiring, reducing costs, collaboration, and innovation will continue to be imperative.

While Commonwealth support per student is not as competitive as neighboring states, we are heartened by the bipartisan reinvestment in higher education that the General Assembly has undertaken in recent years.

As a result of state funding for access and affordability initiatives --- base operations combined with increased financial aid --- college prices in Virginia have moderated, and Longwood is among the institutions where the average net price students pay is declining. As we look to the future, we see an opportunity to grow from that position of strength.

Base operational support helps offset costs that impact tuition, like the institutional share of salary increases, inflation and other unavoidable cost increases.

Support for funding to offset the projected growth in the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program would make a meaningful difference too. This is an important program, but costs have increased dramatically in just a few years, straining budgets.

And support for financial aid for low- and middle-income students makes it possible for students to attend our institutions.

Similarly, funding for the SCHEV Pell Initiative has had significant impact in improving access to higher education through university-specific recruitment and retention initiatives. At Longwood, increasing the number of Pell eligible students and improving retention for this group of students this has been a forefront focus, and we know that increased funding is working; we now have a freshman class where 34 percent is Pell-eligible, up from 27 percent last year. The Pell Initiative funding is a powerful way to transform lives and to keep our talented students in Virginia. We hope support for this initiative is continued.

Higher education in Virginia certainly faces obstacles and pressures that these priorities can help to address, whether that is combatting increasingly aggressive financial aid packages from universities in neighboring states, especially in high-demand fields like healthcare and STEM, or addressing changing dynamics among the college-ready population in high school. We can overcome these obstacles by investing in initiatives that keep Virginia colleges affordable and accessible.

Regarding internships, according to recent polling by the Virginia Business Higher Education Council an overwhelming 93% of Virginians support creating paid internships to help students pay for college and launch their careers.

Collaborative policy ideas are coming into focus on this front, and Virginia has an opportunity to take the lead nationally.

The Commonwealth could lead by giving all students paid work experience and connections to Virginia employers without increasing the time required to obtain a degree. We could lead by establishing campus internship centers that cultivate relationships with employers and place students in work-based learning opportunities. We could lead by providing matching grants for small businesses to hire interns and help cover student expenses. We could lead by developing an online portal for students and employers to connect for internship applications and hiring.

Investments like these have historically returned robustly for Virginia. Each dollar invested in Virginia's public higher education system returns nearly double that to the state treasury and more than 25 dollars in greater Gross State Product.

Making these ideas a reality will require shared bipartisan vision and dedicated funding. The generational benefits for the Commonwealth are profound to begin to contemplate.

Our current Covid generation of young adults faces its own distinctive challenges --- political division, technology-induced isolation, and struggles with interpersonal skills and interaction. All of us in K-12 and higher education are seeing this, as are you. Many of our

young people have simply not developed the mental and social mettle they will need to thrive in a changing economy and society.

For the good of our American experiment in self-government (“a republic if we can keep it,” in the adage of the founders), what young people need is to learn to live with one another; to ask questions of themselves and one another, in classrooms and over shared meals; to learn to debate with civility; to develop a moral and ethical foundation; to appreciate varying perspectives others hold --- as well as timeless truths.

That is what Virginia public colleges and universities offer, and why it is imperative that we continue to work together to make higher education in the Commonwealth the best in the nation.

This is my eleventh year serving as president of Longwood, Virginia’s third oldest public university, after William & Mary and UVa. As a proud Virginian, it is a true honor to have had this chance to address you today. On behalf of the Council of Presidents, we wholeheartedly thank you for your strong and crucial support for higher education, both now and through these dynamic years. And we would also very much like to thank your excellent staff --- April Kees, Wendy Kang, and Anya Pfeiffer.