



V i r g i n i a C o m m o n w e a l t h U n i v e r s i t y

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU)
Presidential Search
Final Report on Stakeholder Input

I. Introduction

The Board of Visitors asked its search advisor, Stephen R. Portch, to conduct interviews, focus groups, and open sessions for multiple stakeholders of VCU. A total of twelve focus groups have been completed, three open sessions have been held and three Town Hall meetings conducted. To date, over 300 individuals have provided input. (For a listing of focus groups and open sessions see Appendix A.)

Four basic questions formed the basis for all the groups and sessions:

1. What do you believe the priorities ought to be for VCU over the next 5-7 years?
2. Given your answer to Question 1, what background and characteristics should the Presidential Search Committee and Board of Visitors be seeking in the next President?
3. How would you “sell” this position, University, and community to potential candidates?
4. What unique circumstances do you think candidates should be aware of at VCU and in the community?

The responses are intended to inform the Search Committee as it formulates the position announcement; they will also assist the Search Committee, the search consultant, and the search advisor as each actively recruits top candidates.

II. Observations on the Process

- The focus groups and open sessions have been very well attended, reflecting a high level of interest in the Presidential Search and the future of VCU.
- The level of interest is high with all stakeholder groups, including those external to VCU.
- The conversations have been both candid and robust, indicating a widespread interest in taking VCU to the next level.
- The consistency of the input around key items, such as the highest priorities for VCU’s future, is remarkable and encouraging.

III. Summary of the Priorities

- **Academic Quality.** Every single group highlighted this priority, although expressing it in slightly different ways. It is important to note that very few people want to see the basic Mission of the University changed. There's widespread support for that Mission, and the phrase most often used to describe that Mission was "The University of Opportunity." There's a genuine and deep appreciation for the diversity, in every sense, in the student body that results from such a Mission.

However, there's a strong sense that both the quality of the academic programs and the quality of the student experience could be enhanced. Many point with pride at the top-ranked graduate programs in sculpture and nurse anesthesia, yet believe that with a focused effort and a focused commitment of resources more programs could be highly ranked and known nationally for their academic quality. The number of endowed chairs would need to be increased as part of this effort, as would the overall proportion of the full-time, tenured/tenure-track faculty. In addition, some suggested increasing the recruitment of high quality students through additional scholarships, yet without reducing the commitment to access.

Many feel that the quality of the student's academic experience could be enhanced by strengthening some aspects of academic support. In particular, many participants believe the library needs to be significantly larger and that the use of technology in support of the academic programs needs to be expanded.

While the University enjoys a positive reputation for the quality of its programs, there is consensus that academic program quality must always be in the forefront of university priorities. This priority dwarfed all others when discussed with stakeholders. Participants believe there's a great opportunity to concentrate on "the intellectual life of the University" over the next five to seven years.

- **Academic Integration.** Virtually all groups believe that there are further opportunities for academic integration not just between the two campuses, but also within each campus. While most people agree that much progress has been made towards a "one university" concept, they still regard it as unfinished business. With a renewed trend towards interdisciplinary activities (including teaching, research, and medical team training) in American higher education, VCU is well positioned to expand its interdisciplinary work but will need, for example, to change its reward system to do so. There are already a good number of examples of faculty to faculty interdisciplinary work, a few programmatic examples, and the innovative co-location of business and engineering in a single, state-of-the-art building. However, most believe that more strategic and focused collaborations are possible, with particular emphasis on greater connectors between the Medical and Monroe Park campuses.

- **Expanding and Diversifying the Resource Base.** There is widespread appreciation for how VCU has fared in a very competitive environment for state resources, particularly for capital funds. However, there is also a widespread recognition that VCU’s ambitions will require a deeper fiscal resource base, especially as the state budget is not likely to be that robust for some time. Fortunately, opportunities do exist for expanding and diversifying the resource base, while maintaining state support:
 - Increased federal funding. VCU has an ideal location for building stronger federal relationships, expanding both competitive and set-aside research funding for grants and contracts.
 - Increased private giving. VCU ranks 50th for annual giving and 74th for endowment among public research universities, which compares reasonably favorably to similar institutions. Yet it has considerable upside potential as large numbers of alumni advance in their careers, although it has considerable work to do to reconnect to those alumni. It also has the potential to expand the giving from its current largely local base of corporations and major givers to a more regional and national base. To do so, however, VCU will have to place a higher priority on its fundraising and alumni infrastructure.
 - Increased tuition. VCU has consciously maintained a low-tuition strategy because of its access mission. This, however, leaves some upside potential for tuition increases, especially if those increases were coupled with an aggressive needs-based financial aid program (for example, by dedicating a percentage of tuition increases to such aid). If tuition does increase at a faster rate than in the past, students would expect to see tangible quality improvements.
 - Increased entrepreneurial activity. VCU already has an entrepreneurial spirit, so more activity in this area would be consistent with the institutional culture.

VCU is a resourceful institution and knows how to work through tough budget times. (“We know how to play through the rain.”) However, its future ambitions will require a significant increase in operating funds.

- **Strengthening the Research Enterprise.** VCU ranks 73rd nationally for total research dollars and 65th for federal research among public institutions. While these rankings are consistent with several of its peer institutions (public urban universities with medical schools), VCU has a number of peers with top 50 research rankings. The University is well positioned in many areas and, with increased emphasis on interdisciplinary research, prospects for additional research funding are promising.

However, there will need to be a visible commitment to this element of VCU’s Mission. For example, the undergraduate/graduate mix (the percentage of students in each category) would likely need to be adjusted somewhat. (It is

currently 70% undergraduate, 20% graduate, and 5% professional.) In addition, the funding to increase the number of graduate assistants and to be competitive for the best graduate students would need to be expanded. The infrastructure to support faculty in seeking and managing grants and contracts would need to be strengthened, particularly at the Monroe Park Campus.

- **Maximizing Diversity.** Participants spoke with pride about the racial/ethnic/cultural diversity of the student body and the richness that it brings to the educational setting. That diversity, however, has yet to be matched at the senior administration, faculty and staff level, even though progress has been made in some areas. Opportunities are available to diversify the senior administration as well as faculty and staff.

There are, and will continue to be, opportunities to diversify the senior administration. In addition, as an urban university, VCU should be able to recruit a more diverse faculty and staff. However, in all instances, there needs to be a deep commitment to do so and an innovative and aggressive plan that brings results. Many participants see this as a significant opportunity for the University to further distinguish itself.

On the student side, some participants believe VCU has yet to optimize the student diversity for educational purposes and needs to not just celebrate its diversity, but also to be intentional about benefiting from it. There may well be both pedagogical and curricular initiatives that could do so. Others pointed out that Virginia's demographics are changing. For example, the Hispanic population has already grown and is projected to continue to do so. VCU needs to anticipate these changes and be proactive in serving Hispanic students. (It should be noted that VCU already offers free Spanish classes for faculty and staff.)

- **Smart Growth.** While acknowledging that the enrollment growth has been important to VCU for visibility and funding purposes, many groups (especially the faculty) believe that future growth has to be managed carefully and has to be closely aligned with the available resources. There's concern that the growth has outstripped at least the human infrastructure and, in some cases, the physical infrastructure. For example, certain degree programs have virtually all the courses offered by non-tenured faculty. The attention to VCU being the largest university in Virginia may also detract some of the attention from its quality.

There are many universities who can only dream of high demand. For VCU the challenge will be how to manage its growth proactively. What should be the size of the undergraduate student body? What percentage of new students should be freshmen and what percentage should be transfer students? What are appropriate admission standards for VCU? What will the total enrollment impact be from improving retention and graduation rates? What are the goals for graduate education? These and other questions will need to be addressed in a comprehensive enrollment management plan.

- **Branding and Marketing.** VCU’s visibility and reputation has advanced markedly, but primarily at a local and state level, although out-of-state enrollment has increased significantly over the past several years. The University is poised to build a greater national reputation, especially if VCU advances a quality agenda for its teaching, research, and community engagement missions. Many universities have embarked on formal branding and marketing projects, recognizing that a successful effort can, for example, enhance faculty, staff and student recruitment. VCU has some distinctive features that should lend themselves to this effort. Some staff pointed out that even internally there’s work to be done as VCU seems to have opportunities for more extensive licensing of products, all of which could add to pride. It was interesting that in a student focus group of between 20-30 students, only one student had clothing that signaled VCU (and that was a shirt associated with his part-time student job!).
- **Infrastructure.** Every group was impressed by the physical transformation of VCU over the last eighteen years. Long-term participants indicated that the physical infrastructure advances had not only been important for the university, but that they had also been critical for downtown Richmond. New academic buildings for areas such as the Life Sciences, Engineering, and Business have helped those programs develop. The establishment of student residences has strengthened campus life and has helped the City of Richmond attract more residents to downtown which, in turn, has helped bring restaurants and some retail back to the area.

Most participants agreed that, while additional facilities will be required in the future, the emphasis does not need to be so much on the physical infrastructure going forward, although the technology infrastructure will need ongoing attention. The human infrastructure will likely need to be examined to ensure adequate support, for examples: for an expanded research base, for supporting student success, and for further engagement with the community. This will not be easy. VCU clearly will need to commit to additional faculty lines, so at least initially, any expansion of the support infrastructure will need to be from reallocation; this will require seeking efficiencies and, perhaps, stopping some current low priority activities.

The issues identified above were those most frequently mentioned. (One surprise was how infrequently global/international opportunities were mentioned, although this may be because many take VCU’s involvement as a “given.”) The positive news for the Presidential Search process is that there’s considerable agreement across groups not just about what should be the priorities, but also about the general direction. Furthermore, the issues are “good” issues, and the pervasive sense that VCU “is not done yet” should be attractive to candidates. In addition, VCU completed a strategic plan (VCU2020 Vision for Excellence) in 2006. This plan has broad support and is frequently referenced across the University. It is a plan with enough specific direction to guide VCU’s future but not so specific that it does not allow for future new ideas or opportunities or adjustments.

IV. Summary of the Desired Characteristics/Background of the President

Again there was considerable consistency across groups. Each group, of course, wanted a President sensitive to its particular needs. However, each group also expressed its views on the characteristics that would best serve VCU in the next phase of its development. The following characteristics build on those identified previously by the Board of Visitors.

A. Desired Background

- A combination of academic credentials and/or intellectual abilities sufficient to command the respect of the faculty along with the management skills sufficient to earn the respect of the Governor, legislature, donors, and the state-wide business community.
- A proven track-record of building a strong talented and diverse senior management team and of having the confidence to delegate broadly to that team. A commitment to distributed leadership.
- A proven track-record of results in diversity at the senior management, faculty, staff, and student levels.
- An ability to garner resources from multiple sources (including the state, the federal government, private giving, and entrepreneurial activities). A mastermind for resource gathering.
- A broad knowledge and insights into the roles of teaching/learning, of research and graduate education, and of medical and medically related education.
- A familiarity and understanding of the current and future issues impacting an urban academic health system.
- A demonstrated comfort level with operating in a political environment on local, state, regional, and federal levels.
- An understanding of and an appreciation for urban issues, including the role of an “engaged university.”
- A commitment to and a proven track-record in international programs and activities.
- A commitment to appropriate and meaningful shared governance, including with the Board of Visitors, faculty, staff and students.
- An interest in, and the ability to advance, the reputation of the University at the local, state, regional, national, and international levels.
- A demonstrated ability to foster institutional pride and loyalty through building a sense of community.

B. Desired Characteristics

- Strong core values, including impeccable integrity, sound judgment, and a commitment to transparency.
- Well-developed interpersonal skills, including listening skills, that are effective with all stakeholders.

- Confident and self-secure; charismatic yet collaborative; tough skinned yet warm-hearted.
- Open, encouraging, and welcoming of new ideas from stakeholders.
- Entrepreneurial in spirit; consensus building by nature; yet decisive in decision-making when needed.
- Intellectual curiosity, well-developed critical thinking skills, a penchant for data informing decisions, and a passion for learning.
- Comfortable with complexity, ambiguity, challenges to authority, and high visibility.
- A consistency of purpose; a tireless work ethic; a balanced life; and a sense of humor.

The President with all the desired background and personal characteristics has yet to be born! However, these descriptions will provide significant guidance to the search process.

Finally, while VCU presents some unique challenges for a President (for example, neighborhood and nomenclature issues), it presents, in the view of most participants, an extraordinary opportunity. VCU has many advantages including:

- A university that embraces change to an uncommon degree. (“Change is the norm here.”)
- A university that has considerable momentum that all stakeholders want to see continued. (“No time for u-turns.”)
- A university with a rich array of programs (including a distinguished arts program and a fully comprehensive medical center), and talented faculty and staff.
- A university with meaningful international programs, including a fully accredited campus of the School of the Arts in Qatar that is celebrating its tenth anniversary.
- A university that is highly engaged with its community and benefits from the renewed interest in an urban environment from faculty candidates.
- A university with high student interest and demand.
- A university with a dynamic, financially stable, and patient-oriented health system.
- A university with multiple positive data trend lines (e.g. student demand; student quality; student retention and graduation rates).
- A university that functions effectively as a result of the depth and talent of its administration (although with further opportunities for greater efficiencies as greater integration occurs).
- A university that has location, location, location. (Little snow; lots of activities; proximity to several major cities, beaches, and mountains; good quality of life and reasonable cost-of-living.)

V. Conclusion

The Board of Visitors and the Presidential Search Committee have available to them a wealth of input from stakeholders to inform the Presidential Search. The Search Committee should continue to seek input; for example, this report could be posted on the web site and future comments could be encouraged using that medium. All of this input can be utilized first in framing the position announcement and ultimately in assessing the candidates. “Fit” is a crucial element in every presidential search, and the input helps frame that “fit” for the Presidential Search Committee and ultimately the Board of Visitors, who will make the final decision. There is a “right” President for this time, for this place, for this opportunity, and the stakeholders’ comments give clear guidance and the definition of “right” for VCU.

**Presidential Search
Focus Groups and Open Sessions
(as of 11/20/08)**

Focus Groups

Alumni from both campuses
Board of Visitors (current)
Board of Visitors (former)
Chairs and Directors
Classified Staff Senate Leadership
Community Leaders
Faculty Senate Leadership
Students from both campuses
Trustees from the five foundations
VCUHS Board members
VCUHS Senior Leadership
VCU Senior Administration

Open Forums

University Community - Monroe Park Campus
University Community – Monroe Park Campus
University Community – MCV Campus

Town Hall Meetings

University Community – Monroe Park Campus
University Community – MCV Campus
University Community – Monroe Park Campus