Good afternoon, everyone! Welcome to this year’s State of the University Address. It is wonderful to see so many members of the community here today, and I am grateful to everyone who is tuning in via livestream.

We gather here today for three simple reasons: to celebrate our shared achievements as a University community; to look ahead to new opportunities we will pursue together in the coming years; and – if we are honest with ourselves – to enjoy a nice lunch.

I’m especially excited to address you today in this beautifully renovated visual and performing arts center, representing a major investment by the University in performing arts and arts education over the past four years.

Please join me in thanking University architect, Andrew McBride, and his team; the Modlin staff; and the Art and Art history faculty who were displaced and patiently waited for renovations to be completed.

I hope you all are energized for another academic year, and even more so after meeting some of our new students over the past few weeks.

I met one first-year student who was just beaming after the first few weeks of class. He told me that unlike his high school calculus class, his professor here showed students that calculus actually has a point!

Meeting enthusiastic students like that always reminds me why we are all here in the first place. And that is, as our mission states, to prepare students to lead lives of purpose, wherever they may find their purpose in the world.
I am very much looking forward to working with all of you this year as we continue to fulfill this important mission.

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Today, I would like to speak with you about our new operating focus to realize our educational mission and, directly related, the goals of our strategic plan.

This operating focus can be summed up as “to be, and to be recognized as, one of the strongest liberal arts institutions in the nation.” And our efforts can be broken down to three interrelated priorities: Academic Excellence, Student Quality and Success, and an Engaged University Community.

This focus does not replace our strategic plan. It simply provides a roadmap that helps us better understand where we are, where we are going, and how to get there as we strive to offer the best liberal arts education in the country.

As we undertake this work, we do so with a sense of gratitude for the privileged position we occupy in higher education. We are fiscally sound. We have a rising reputation. And we are blessed with exceptional faculty, staff, students, alumni, university leaders, and trustees.

But we also undertake this work with a sense of urgency. Many institutions have not fared as well as us in recent years.

I have spoken with presidents across the country who are facing hard choices.

Softening enrollment, escalating financial pressures, and a possible recession all loom large on the horizon.

At a time of relative plenty for UR, we must remember that our success is neither a foregone conclusion nor a matter of chance.

Our success rests on a shared commitment among generations of faculty and staff; students and alumni; university leaders and trustees to be good stewards of the remarkable resources we are so fortunate to have;
Including funds for our needs and aspirations – and the faculty, staff, student, and alumni relationships that form the core of our educational model.

As stewards of the University at this moment in our history, I have every confidence in our ability to guide our institutional priorities for the coming years – and fortify our position as a premier liberal arts institution.

Let me tell you why.

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To begin, the Spider Community has a long history of collective stewardship propelling our University forward.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of E. Claiborne Robins, Sr.’s $50 million gift to the University of Richmond;

A gift so transformative that we can honestly claim that we would not be who we are today without it.

I was reminded of the Robins Gift’s transformative impact earlier this summer when my wife Dr. Betty Neal Crutcher and I were in Massachusetts.

50 years ago, few people in Massachusetts had heard of the University of Richmond. Of the 673 students who graduated in the spring of 1969, only 2 were from Massachusetts – and only about 16% of them came from out of state.

Today, the reach and reputation of the Richmond name is beyond what could have been imagined 50 years ago.

Dr. Betty and I attended a luncheon while in Massachusetts hosted by last year’s Commencement speaker, Nancy Kramer. With the exception of Nancy and her family, we didn’t know anyone there.

But let me tell you – pretty much everybody there knew the University of Richmond.
After I was introduced as the president of the University, a gentleman said to me, “Oh, wow, that’s a really hot school right now. My son has several friends who are there; several more who are applying there; and he is thinking of applying there himself.”

I hear this constantly in my travels around the country.

It is emblematic of how the Robins Gift catapulted us from a small regional university to a national liberal arts institution that attracts the most talented students across the nation and world.

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Over the last year, we have continued our remarkable upward trajectory by continuing to advance academic excellence.

We recruited an outstanding new dean of the Business School, Mickey Quiñones.

Dean Quiñones is not only an internationally recognized scholar but an award winning teacher who embodies the teacher-scholar model.

To give you a glimpse into his leadership style, let me share with you what I learned about Dean Quiñones’ experience at the Robins School’s Welcome Back BBQ.

There, Dean Quiñones spoke with a student who had just had a captivating conversation with one of the school’s new faculty members.

The student asked Dean Quiñones if he was going to miss teaching, to which he replied, “Yes, but my job is now to ensure that our students have thoughtful and engaged professors, just like the one you were speaking with, in every classroom every single day.”

I am confident that the Business School is in good hands. Please join me in welcoming Dean Quiñones.
This fall, we also welcomed ten new tenured and tenure track faculty, whose expertise range from tech law and financial decision-making to democratic theory and indigenous governance.

We are privileged to welcome such exceptional teacher-scholars into our community.

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Now, just as we have continued to advance academic excellence, so too have we continued to advance student quality and success.

The impact of our work is evident in every corner of our campus. All around us are remarkably ambitious, curious, and determined students.

Take the students here today, so curious about the state of our university that they sacrificed having Jersey Dirt for lunch! I’m not sure I would even do that! But I am grateful to all the students who have joined us.

Our enrollment and admissions colleagues once again did a fantastic job attracting a well-rounded, dynamic, and diverse first-year class.

And they did so at time when many of our peers are falling short in meeting their enrollment goals.

Indeed, the Class of 2023 is one of the most academically accomplished classes in our history, with record-breaking GPA and SAT scores.

Moreover, they represent many backgrounds, identities, ideologies, and experiences, mirroring the world they will enter upon graduation.

Among their ranks are humanitarians who have raised money to build water wells in South Sudan – and organized shoe drives for Haiti and countries in Africa;

Inclusion advocates who have founded gay-straight alliances at their schools – and campaigned to raise awareness about autism and HIV;
Creative entrepreneurs who have started their own businesses and earned patents;

Artists who have produced shorts films and performed at Carnegie Hall;

And champion athletes, including a five-time national champion rock climber, who in our community of Spiders may be UR’s first true Spiderman.

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Finally, we have continued to support and nurture an engaged community of alumni, parents, and friends.

Our two new fundraising initiatives designed to engage the entire UR community, Spiders Helping Spiders last fall and UR Giving Day last spring, were both tremendously successful.

I was especially heartened to see an increase in the level of faculty and staff participation, and I want to thank you all for helping to build a culture of philanthropy at Richmond.

With your support, and support from all corners of our community, we achieved record-breaking results.

We exceeded our fundraising goal, raising over $46 million – our highest total in the last two decades.

And we saw a significant increase in the number of alumni involved, growing alumni engagement by 17% – and growing young alumni engagement by an even more impressive 32% over the prior year.

These are all clear signs of broad and growing support for the University, and I am grateful to our colleagues in Advancement for all their good work.

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This year, we will continue to advance our institutional priorities of academic excellence, student quality and success, and an engaged community to fortify our position as leader in higher education.

Today, I will focus on just three ways in which we will do so: making excellence inclusive; advancing freedom of expression; and expanding what we mean by an engaged community.

I will begin with inclusive excellence.

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One of our primary goals is to build an inclusive community where students from diverse backgrounds, experiences, identities, and ideologies learn how to live and learn together in a way that’s open and honest and real.

And we are doing so not just for the sake of being inclusive, but also because we know it helps ensure that talented students, faculty, and staff from all backgrounds recognize Richmond as a desirable place to live, work, and study.

As you may have seen, the Princeton Review recently released its latest rankings. We received many accolades, from #2 Best Career Services to #5 Best-Run College to #7 Best Classroom Experience.

That’s great. We deserve it and the other recognition we received. But we did not excel in every category.

There was also a question on the survey that informed the rankings to this effect: To what degree do you agree or disagree with this statement: "Different types of students (black/white, rich/poor) interact frequently and easily."

On this, we were fourth from the bottom.

Yet this is not news to us. This is why we made ensuring a “Thriving and Inclusive community” a pillar of our strategic plan.
It is sobering how this ranking suggests we are not yet harnessing the power of diversity to enhance the educational experience.

Of course, it also perhaps indicates that we have heightened our students’ awareness and made them even more discerning about inclusion, diversity, and equity. And that is a good thing.

This summer, we released “Making Excellence Inclusive: University Report and Recommendations” to propel our work forward.

Consistent with recommendations I received, I’ve appointed an interim senior administrative officer and a university-wide council to accelerate our efforts to become a thriving and inclusive community.

We will focus on three interrelated goals.

The first is representation, meaning building a campus community that reflects the rich diversity of our nation and world.

The second is belonging; that is cultivating an inclusive environment in which all can experience a sense of belonging;

And the third goal is capability, meaning building a skilled intercultural community in which all members benefit from the rich diversity of our campus and achieve meaningful understanding across cultural and ideological boundaries.

Because we know no single campus leader alone can achieve such cultural change, we have established a distributed leadership model for inclusive excellence.

I am grateful to Executive Vice Presidents Jeff Legro and Dave Hale for overseeing this important work – and to the President’s Cabinet and our deans, all of whom will make a significant and sustained investment in this work.

We are also so fortunate that Dr. Amy Howard from community initiatives and the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement has accepted the position of interim senior administrative officer;
And just as fortunate that Dr. Glyn Hughes and Professor Patricia Herrera have agreed to co-chair our university-wide Institutional Coordinating Council.

We have already begun work on implementing recommendations from the report. Indeed, we have achieved some important results, from developing a new multicultural space for students to enhancing new student orientation.

This year, we will also build on the work of the Presidential Commission for University History and Identity.

To that end, I am pleased to announce that we have enlisted celebrated public historian Dr. Lauranett Lee, who co-chaired the Commission, to help us tell a fuller, more inclusive story of who we were, are, and aspire to be;

Work that includes researching people excluded from our institutional history, such as the enslaved people believed to be buried on our campus, and thinking about how we might commemorate and memorialize them.

Moreover, the University has committed to build on the good work of the three-year Race & Racism project pilot – and continue incorporating the University’s history and legacies into our teaching and research.

In its next phase, as the Race & Memory initiative, the University will continue to support student research opportunities; expand course offerings connected to UR’s history and identity; grow a digital archive; and expand opportunities for student learning.

Dr. Lee’s work, along with the student-centered work of the Race & Memory initiative, will lead the way in helping us achieve deeper racial understanding on our campus.

Ultimately, though, we can only succeed in making excellence inclusive at Richmond if all members of the University community commit to and engage in this important work.
So, if you haven’t done so already, I encourage you all to read the report and consider how you can help us advance the goals of representation, belonging, and capability.

All of this work won’t be easy. It will ask much of each of us. But if we truly commit to these goals, then I am confident that we will succeed in living up to our promise as a truly intercultural community – one that embraces the dignity, worth, and contributions of all individuals.

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I’d now like to turn to freedom of expression, which really gets to the reason of wanting to have a diverse and inclusive community to begin with.

We’ve made great strides in building a more diverse community, even if our work remains incomplete.

The next step is to harness our rich representational diversity to foster meaningful conversations that will help us make Richmond more inclusive.

This is no easy task. We live in a time in which so many of us only engage with like-minded individuals; consume media that reinforces our own beliefs; or avoid conversations that cause discomfort.

However comfortable this may be, it is antithetical to the spirit of higher education, which since its founding days has relied upon diversity of thought and the questioning of truth to advance its shared mission.

In these polarized times, residential college campuses offer a supportive environment in which students learn how to interact with people who are drastically different from them – and have authentic conversations about their differences, from race and class to politics and ideology.

These conversations can be deeply uncomfortable at times. They can lead to bruised feelings, and some may even feel that silence is the best option.
Yet, as civil-rights icon Eleanor Holmes Norton reminds us, “Those who have brought change to our country did not win it by shutting down the other side. They won change the hard and only way that ensures it will be lasting. They persisted against their adversaries until they persuaded the country that they should prevail.”

We should have every confidence in the values that bind our community together – values that include diversity, equity, and inclusion.

But we should never take for granted that they will triumph, especially at a time when acts of violence and the rhetoric of hate, bigotry, and intolerance have become all too common.

If we are to live up to the promise of our educational mission, we must not stifle dialogue or shield students from ideas that might offend them.

We must welcome the debate, modeling for our students how to listen more intently to understand competing perspectives; how to rethink positions; and ultimately how to find their voices and fight for what they believe in using a potent triad of energy, civility, and substance.

This is certainly the longer and more challenging path toward inclusion. But in a democratic society, progress rarely comes without a tussle – and substantive conversations are never one-sided.

I’m proud of our community’s commitment to freedom of expression. Reason Magazine recognized Richmond as one of ten universities that stands out for encouraging civil and diverse debate.

This year we will continue to advance a thriving and inclusive community through freedom of expression.

To that end, I have established a Task Force on Free Expression, chaired by law faculty member Kurt Lash.
Their charge is to develop a Freedom of Expression Statement rooted in our history, mission, and values that will guide the University of Richmond community going forward.

Our goal is to codify our existing practice, which is to welcome a range of viewpoints.

The Task Force is already hard at work, and I commend everyone and especially Professor Lash for their excellent work thus far.

They will submit their draft statement to me by the end of the fall semester, and this will be a topic of University discussion throughout the fall and into the spring.

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Finally, I would like to briefly return to the idea of an engaged community. You have already heard me talk about creating a culture of philanthropy, and I am grateful for all that you do to help us turn this aspiration into a reality.

But an engaged community goes beyond giving financially. It also includes giving time and actively participating in our Spider Community.

Last spring, I saw a wonderful example of such engagement when I hosted a reception in San Francisco for the participants of our first “Spiders in Silicon Valley Road Trip”;

A trip designed to help our students learn more about careers in innovation and entrepreneurship.

It was a rainy evening, so I thought turnout might be low. But to my delight, we had a full house. And what I saw before me truly moved me.

As I looked around the room, I saw every constituency the University serves united in common purpose, putting our values of lifelong learning, mentoring, and commitment to the University into action.
I saw remarkably generous alumni who had opened doors for our students at top Silicon Valley companies and start-ups – and shared with them their knowledge and experience;

Including one man who had studied Classics at Richmond and now has his own IT company. The Ancient Romans were undoubtedly great innovators. But going from Ancient Rome to an IT company – now that’s a poster child for a liberal arts education if ever there was one.

I also saw members of our outstanding faculty who had already done so much to prepare our students to make a positive impact in the world – and had made the trip out to further support them.

I saw our talented career services and alumni relations staff who had worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make the trip and reception such a great success.

And last but not least, I saw our students develop and deepen connections with everyone in the room, including two of my mentees who raved about how alumni went out of their way to help them think through potential career paths.

It was a perfect example of what we mean by engaged community – and showed how much we can achieve by supporting those collective endeavors which stand to benefit all faculty, staff, students, and alumni.

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Today, I have spoken about responsible stewardship, celebrating with you community members who have worked so hard to ensure the health and vibrancy of our University.

I have done so because I strongly believe it is who we are as a community that explains the strong state of our University.

So I’d like each of you to take just a moment to shake hands with the people around you and thank them for helping make Richmond the great institution it is today. Really, I’ll wait!
Thanks to the contributions of each and every one of you, the state of the University is strong.

As stewards of the University at this moment in our history, we have a duty to keep up the good work and ensure that the Richmond name remains synonymous with excellence.

I look forward to working with you today, tomorrow, and throughout the year to make that happen.

Now, to the main event: lunch! Thank you.