Introduction

Thank you, Dave, for your kind and heartfelt words. I am grateful for your extraordinary leadership during this difficult time, and I look forward to our continued work together these next two academic years.

As I was writing my message to the community last week, I was reminded of something my father told me when I was a young man.

My father retired at age 61 after a 42-year career in which he worked his way up from chipper, to inspector, to the first Black manager at Cincinnati Milacron – the world’s largest machine tool company at the time.

My father was very proud of his career, and rightly so. But he always encouraged me and my brother not to work too long. It was important, he said, to take time to enjoy life and explore other interests.

Well, I obviously failed that test. I will be 75 years old when I step down in 2022, completing my second presidency. But it is the one test I am happy to have failed.

It has been an honor and a privilege to lead this great institution. And while Dr. Betty Neal Crutcher and I are looking forward to a sabbatical year and reconnecting with friends and colleagues in Berlin, we will always be tireless advocates for this University.
But enough about me. Today is about all of us as a community. This is an opportunity to look back and celebrate our shared achievements – and to look forward and consider our shared aspirations for the University.

We certainly have our work cut out for us. As I have said before, in my 43 years of experience in higher education, I have never seen anything like the staggering array of challenges that have coalesced over the past six months.

Indeed, I believe we are living through the most disruptive time in higher education since World War II.

We are living through the worst public health crisis since 1918; the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression; and the most widespread civil rights activism since 1968.

This will undoubtedly be an academic year unlike any other. But with new challenges also come new possibilities, especially to forge a stronger community in response to shared adversity.

To seize this moment, our mindset must not be how we will survive until things return to normal; but rather how we will adapt, innovate, and thrive in a world of new realities.

I am pleased, but not surprised, that the Spider Community has shown that it is more than up to the task, even as the pandemic has turned our lives upside down.

Your collective commitment to our educational mission is a constant source of strength and inspiration for me – and the reason why I remain optimistic about the future despite all the difficulties of this moment.
Today, I would like to address four topics, including our ongoing response to COVID-19; our commitments to academic excellence and inclusive excellence; and our free expression work, that demonstrate the resilience and resolve of our community – and how in this difficult time, we continue to advance our goal to be, and to be recognized as, one of the strongest liberal arts institutions in the nation.

**COVID-19**

Let me begin with the pandemic. A student recently shared with me her experience returning to campus and attending both remote and in person classes.

Amid the fear and anxiety of this moment, she said the University had created “an oasis of calm and safety where I feel safe to learn.”

Of her professors, she said they had gone above and beyond to check in on students and create an environment in which, at least for a few hours, she could forget the chaos of our wider world – and instead focus on learning and pursuing her dreams.

Of the staff, she said words cannot describe how wonderful it feels to walk into a building and feel safe – something a few months ago she thought would have been impossible.

And of her fellow students, she said that when it comes to wearing their masks and social distancing, they are “crushing it.”

Our community is indeed “crushing it,” to borrow the technical phrase.

While our work is far from over, and we must not grow complacent, it is no accident that the 117 Days of Protecting Our Web campaign — the length of the fall term — is off to a safe start.
To date, 0.4% of our community has tested positive for COVID-19 – a testament to our community’s commitment to embracing the Healthy Web Community Compact.

I am grateful to everyone – staff, faculty, and students – for leading by example and living our shared responsibility to care for ourselves and one another.

I especially want to thank our faculty and staff for laying the groundwork for our students’ return and the continuity of the semester – and for the many ways you have innovated to foster community and nurture meaningful connections in this time of disconnect and “Zoom fatigue.”

I recognize the immense sacrifices you have made – and are making – so that this fall semester is both possible and high quality. You have not only worked around the clock, doing everything from redesigning courses and enhancing support services;

To producing creative communications – and developing innovative ways to fundraise and engage and support our alumni;

To completely reimagining campus dining, upgrading facilities, and installing modular housing to provide robust isolation and quarantine space for our students;

To equipping classrooms across campus with technological support so that both in-person and remote teaching can successfully occur...

I could go on and on. When I hear about what you have done and are doing to educate our students under very trying circumstances, I
sometimes get emotional. The scope and scale of your efforts are truly incredible.

And many of you have done it while also experiencing the isolation of remote work; adapting to unfamiliar campus routines; homeschooling and looking after your children; and caring for loved ones at home – or not being able to care for those who live elsewhere.

It has been an immensely difficult, stressful, and frankly, exhausting undertaking. And I share your pain. But I assure you that your sacrifices have not gone unnoticed.

Like the student I quoted earlier, I have heard from many other students – not to mention parents and alumni – praising your efforts.

I hope you will take pride in knowing how successful you have been in preserving both the hallmarks of the Richmond experience our students know and love – and the work environment that draws so many to commit their careers to this special place.

Although I fully realize that verbal recognition can only go so far, I cannot resist doing it. So, on behalf of all Spiders, I thank you for the monumental effort you have made to continue to fulfill our institutional mission.

As we look to the future, I wish I could say things will be easier in the months ahead. I know we are all craving normalcy, and nobody deserves a break more than all of you.

But I would be doing you a disservice if I failed to acknowledge that there is no return to the old normal.
The reality is that COVID-19 is not going away anytime soon. At the very least, it will be with us through this autumn and the coming spring; it very well may be with us as we begin the next academic year in fall 2021.

That means we must continue our good work of living responsibly with the virus, embracing our new social norms of mask wearing and social distancing – and preparing for all contingencies.

I am grateful for all the hard work so many in our community have done – and continue to do – to prepare for remote instruction. Please know I will not hesitate to make the call to go fully remote if conditions warrant such a decision.

I am also grateful to everyone working so hard to ensure we are thoroughly prepared to move to less restrictive stages of our Physical Distancing Framework, again if conditions warrant such a decision.

We will eventually pass through this maelstrom, but when we do, we must be prepared to navigate a weathered and altered higher education landscape.

At a time when more and more people are questioning higher education’s value proposition, we must continue to assess and reassess the delivery of our educational mission – and demonstrate anew the transformative power of the residential educational experience.

At a time when higher education is experiencing increased financial pressure, we must also learn to live with new fiscal realities.

Please know, however, that my highest priority this budget cycle is faculty and staff salary increases for the 2021-22 budget.
As stewards of the University at this moment in our history, we have an obligation to leave the University stronger than we found it for the generations to come.

I am confident we will rise to the challenge. And I look forward to hearing your continued input and counsel in the Faculty Senate, at USAC, and at student government and alumni association meetings.

**Academic Excellence**

Let me now turn to academic excellence. I said at the beginning of my remarks that I have never seen anything like today’s confluence of challenges.

I should add that in my 43 years in higher education, I have also never been more convinced of the need for graduates with a grounding in liberal education.

The societal response required to overcome the novel coronavirus – and future pandemics – cannot be achieved by offering students narrow training for a particular job.

Rather, as our community of teacher-scholars has demonstrated, it calls for preparing agile thinkers, capable of creating connections across disciplinary boundaries.

Consider, for example, Professor of Mathematics Lester Caudill, who last semester taught a course called “Mathematical Models in Biology and Medicine.”

As you may have read in our Newsroom, which is just one way our communication colleagues excel at telling the University’s story, Professor Caudill taught students mathematical modeling to help
address “what if” scenarios, such as what if there were a major flu outbreak amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Professor Caudill explained, “Once we can simulate how the infection spreads and how severe it is, we can start to explore different ways of intervening, to get a sense of how much of an impact possible interventions may offer.”

I share this story for two reasons. First, it is emblematic of how our teacher-scholars live beautifully our mission of preparing students for lives of purpose in our diverse and complex world.

Second, it is a testament to the ambition, creativity, and determination of our students to effectively meet the challenges of our time.

As I noted in my letter to the community last week, I am proud of everything we have accomplished together to strengthen our intellectual community.

Indeed, our faculty and staff’s commitment to academic excellence is the reason why U.S. News and World Report recently ranked us #22 for National Liberal Arts Colleges – our highest ranking ever in this category.

Together, we have bolstered support for faculty development, from the Teaching and Scholarship Hub to the Program on Academic Leadership.

We have accelerated our progress in recruiting and retaining a world-class, diverse, and accomplished faculty. 36% of our hires in the last five years have been persons of color or international citizens – and 42% have been women.
We have also enriched our students’ educational experience through a range of new programs, including the launch of the Endeavor and Encompass programs.

And we continue to strengthen the quality and diversity of our student population, while enhancing the retention and graduation rates of our students.

This year, 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 COVID has compounded the enrollment challenges facing so many colleges and universities.

Like the classes that came before it, the Class of 2023 will strengthen and enrich our intellectual community.

Their average GPA is 3.66; 131 students have never earned a grade below an A; and more than half have never earned a grade below an A—something most of us cannot claim!

Our new students also represent many backgrounds, identities, ideologies, and experiences, mirroring the world they will enter upon graduation.

They come from 37 states and 38 countries; 27% are US students of color; and 13% are the first in their families to go to college, just as I was.

Among their ranks are the founder of a non-profit that engages young voters in the civic process and advocates for causes within their communities;
The co-CEO of a company that has brought a patented solution for restoring wires to mass production;

A top 100 nationally ranked tennis player;

And the youngest professional dancer at the Richmond Ballet.

As we welcome our talented new students to the University, they will find that we are committed to strengthening our intellectual community through critically important strategic investments.

Last year, we completed a $37 million, multi-year transformation of our arts facilities.

This year, we continue our comprehensive renovation and expansion of Ryland Hall, which will add nearly 12,000 square feet of space – and allow us to create a new humanities center.

And this fall, we will begin the opening of our new Well-Being Center, which could not come at a more opportune time.

Even before the crisis hit, research from Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner had found that achieving mental wellness and developing a sense of belonging are the greatest challenges facing college students today.

COVID-19 has only exacerbated the problem. Just like everyone else, students too are contending with stress and anxiety.

Students of color and their families have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, while international students face unique
challenges, including trying to stay on top of their studies remotely from different time zones.

No single office or division alone can address such a complex and alarming problem. But I am reassured by the fact that our new Well-Being Center will bring together all our wellness resources under one roof, providing students with easier access to critical services.

Cultivating habits of sound mind and body, the Well-Being Center will help our students better understand that success in college is not just about achieving a rich intellectual life; it is also about equipping yourself to lead a happy, purposeful, and resilient life.

That is a lesson we would all do well to remember. So, I encourage you to take advantage of the programs and resources offered by URWELL – and to nurture your own personal means of rejuvenating yourselves.

Caring for ourselves and one another must remain the touchstone of this year. What I aim to do personally, and what I ask of all of us, is to stay focused on living our shared values and delivering on our educational mission to the best of our abilities, while recognizing and accepting our constraints and limitations.

**Inclusive Excellence**

Next, I’d like to turn to our inclusive excellence initiative – and reiterate what I said to you all this past summer.

Our work this year is not just about navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, but also about demonstrating who we are as a community in a society still plagued by systemic racism and inequality;
For this is another public health crisis, and it threatens to erode our values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

I learned this lesson early on in life, at age 6 or 7, when I had my first encounter with overt racism. It happened on a Sunday afternoon, coming home from church, when my parents, brother, and I prepared to board an approaching bus. But instead of stopping, the driver smirked at us and drove by.

My family knew a short cut to the next stop, so we were able to catch up to the bus. “Why didn’t you stop?” my father yelled at the driver as we stepped on. “I know you saw us! Was it because we’re Black?”

When we got home, my father sat my brother and me down and explained some white people would refuse to respect us because of our skin color, but we were just as American as they were – and we had the same rights to life, liberty, and opportunity.

He also told us not to limit our aspirations as a result of the way we were treated. We could achieve anything that we wanted, he said, as long as we were willing to work hard for it.

This is the promise of America, but as we have been reminded over and over again these past several months, it remains unfulfilled. The continued violence against Black and Brown people; the health and economic disparities compounded by COVID – these are just some of the daily reminders that underscore what should be an uncontroversial truth.

At Richmond, we are of course not immune to the scourge of racism, as last semester’s racist and xenophobic incidents on campus reminded us. Some continue to feel frustrated, exhausted, and vulnerable – and I share your pain.
Our community has not shied away from reckoning honestly with our challenges. Instead, I am proud that we have chosen once again to transform adversity into an opportunity to build community;

A community in which all can participate fully in the life of the institution, achieve belonging, and reach their full potential.

When I challenged our community in my inaugural address to use the rich diversity that we had achieved to change the culture of the University so that everyone – regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. could thrive – I was not naïve enough to think that this cultural transformation could be achieved in five years, or even ten years.

We are barely one generation away from legal segregation by race in this country. So, I have no illusion about the USA eliminating the scourge of systemic racism even in my lifetime. Our efforts at making excellence inclusive at Richmond are, and will be, a continuous work in progress.

And there has been significant progress since releasing our “Making Excellence Inclusive” report a year ago.

We have opened a pilot multicultural space – and substantially increased funding for student cultural organizations.

We have expanded an ambitious inclusive pedagogy program – and encouraged more intergroup dialogue and anti-bias training.

We have established the Burial Ground Memorialization Committee to honor the enslaved who lived, labored, and died here – and recognized Juneteenth as a university holiday.
This year we will deepen our commitment to this work.

As was announced earlier this semester, we are fortifying our distributed leadership approach, which strives to foster a shared commitment to inclusive excellence work across campus.

I am grateful to Dr. Amy Howard for agreeing to a three-year term as Senior Administrative Officer for Equity and Community – a cabinet-level leadership position.

Dr. Howard has done a wonderful job as the anchor of our distributed leadership model for inclusive excellence, helping us to build on many years of progress – and to propel this work forward.

I am also grateful to Dr. Patricia Herrera and Dr. Glyn Hughes for extending their service as co-chairs of the Institutional Coordinating Council.

They and all the members of the ICC have played an essential role in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion, including providing critical feedback during COVID-19 contingency planning.

Additionally, we are bolstering support for students. Dr. Tina Cade will lead a new office merging the offices of Common Ground and Multicultural Affairs.

Dr. Cade and the talented staff members of these offices bring a wealth of experience serving underrepresented students – and I have every confidence in their leadership to strengthen the reach and impact of our support services.
I am also equally grateful to our colleagues in International Education, Disability Services, and Spider Athletics for their commitment and leadership in reimagining student support services.

Finally, we are building institutional capacity to make excellence inclusive.

I am especially excited that the President’s Student Cabinet will be in place later this semester. This Cabinet will fill an important role in our distributed leadership model, giving students a stronger voice in institutional decisions and deliberations.

Ultimately, we can only succeed in making excellence inclusive if all members of the University community commit to and engage with this important work.

So, if you haven’t done so already, engage with the ICC or participate in a relevant Faculty Hub workshop.

Attend discussion groups such as Intersections, the White Anti-Racism group, or the student-led Interpoint.

Your beliefs may be challenged. You may feel uncomfortable at times. But we should not recoil from difficult conversations – or grow defensive when someone points out our biases or prejudices.

Instead, we should be grateful and welcome the conversation, for we are being done a service and paid a compliment – that’s right, a compliment.

To borrow liberally the words of one 20th century dissenter from another context, “It is a service because it may spur [you]...to do better
than [you are]...doing; it is a compliment because it evidences a belief that [you]...can do better than [you are]...doing.”

Recognizing unconscious biases and even complicity in racism is difficult and painful. But remember: racism is not about who you are; it is about what you think and do. Recognition of inherently racist attitudes and beliefs does not make you a bad person. It is not an indictment of your moral character.

It means you are actually experiencing a racial awakening; you are beginning to understand racism as a systemic force shaping our upbringings and lives; you are aware of what it means and takes to dismantle systemic racism.

Of course, for such difficult conversations to succeed – and for cross-cultural relationships to deepen – we must ensure that we do not foster an environment in which everyone is walking on eggshells out of fear of offending and being ostracized.

**Free Expression**

That brings me to my last subject: free expression. As a Black man, I know all too well the pain and discomfort that can come from the words of others.

Indeed, I struggled to find belonging in my chosen field of classical music – a world that unfortunately does not include many people who look like me.

As a Fulbright scholar in Germany in the mid-1970s, I performed as the principal cellist in a chamber orchestra. Reviewers praised my musical and interpretive abilities. Yet, almost universally, they described me as a “colored cellist.”
The cacophony of praise and racism was exasperating, and left me wondering if I would ever be fully recognized solely as a professional musician.

Yet, despite such painful experiences, I’ve long believed that free expression is at the heart of building a more inclusive society.

The most recent Knight-Gallup survey on free expression underscores that most students also believe that both “an inclusive society that is welcoming to diverse groups” and free speech rights are “extremely important” in nearly equal measure.

But students arrive on campus not fully equipped to exercise their First Amendment rights to build a more inclusive society. Indeed, most students come to college with little experience in building cross-cultural relationships.

In my view, a university campus is the place to start learning how to build these relationships. But how can anyone learn if they’re afraid – of failing, or offending, or asking an insensitive question?

Likewise, how does constant vigilance against perceived slights give our students the inner fortitude they will need to navigate an endlessly complex world?

The time students spend on our campuses may be their last – and best – opportunity to learn how to have conversations across racial, cultural, and ideological differences.

For the health of our democracy, we must teach students that a "commitment to fostering a diverse, inclusive community demands an
equally strong commitment to freedom of expression," as our Task Force on Free Expression concluded.

The rich diversity of our communities ensures all members will encounter viewpoints that challenge their own. If we encourage students to welcome such moments and listen actively, even when what they hear knocks them off balance, we can help them better understand why individuals with different views think and believe as they do.

This active listening is ultimately at the heart of bridging racial and cultural divides in our pluralistic democracy, for it helps students develop empathy, patience, and discipline – the building blocks of coalition-building.

However, this is not necessarily as simple as I make it sound. It is true that power and position matter and that some students – in particular, those who are underrepresented – may perceive that they do not have equal access to engage in counter-speech.

As teacher-scholars and leaders, we must understand this perception, and we must work with them to find the inner strength to respond in their own manner.

This semester, we will continue soliciting your feedback on the recommended Statement on Free Expression through conversations with faculty, staff, and students.

Your engagement and feedback will help us formalize our commitment to free expression, ensuring the Statement reflects our principles and values as an institution. It is my hope the Statement will live alongside our institutional values when finalized and adopted, demonstrating who we are – and what we stand for as an academic community.
Please know, however, that the Statement is not a policy; it is a living, breathing statement of our principles and values that will not be set in stone, but rather revisited over time. I very much look forward to our community discussions on free expression this semester.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, and in spite of 2020 giving us hell, the state of the University is strong – and that’s because of all of you. Thank you once again for everything you have done to protect and strengthen our web.

The many examples of excellence across campus that I have discussed today bring to the fore the best qualities of the Spider community in these difficult times.

As we continue to respond to the pandemic, we will remain clear-eyed about the challenges ahead, but we will also keep sight of a brighter future and go forward with confidence and determination.

This Spider community – our shared community – is strong and resilient, and together I am confident we will not only meet this moment, but emerge stronger than before.

Thank you.