



## WHAT WE OWE THE RISING GENERATION

-Remarks to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia-

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On prior occasions when I've had the honor to address the Council as a body, I've taken it as a moment to offer a variety of technical ideas or insights. Today, when each day's headlines --- in the time-warped days, months, and years we've been in --- make it feel like we are walking through the pages of history, let me instead give voice to a broad and crucial challenge.

This year's college seniors, soon to be graduates, as a class and cohort nationwide are the first graduating class by majority to be born in this century. If there was any doubt as they were coming of age earlier, there is no doubt now --- on this side of covid and 2020 --- that they are in the vanguard of fulcrum years of disruption for the nation and the world.

On campuses, amidst this disruption the normal American residential college experience is fitfully returning --- emerging from a global pandemic warily, under shadow of a growing specter of global conflict. As it does, we owe college students an acknowledgment of what they have lost. And we must include making them whole among our many generational priorities in the years of recovery ahead.

At stake is not just the mental health and educational progress of a generation. It's also urgent for our fragile national common good, in which residential higher education plays an often underappreciated role as a seedbed of citizenship. At an hour of critical need, a great engine of American democracy has sputtered and must be re-engaged.

Society may not place college students high in the rightful litany of concerns in the wake of Covid-19. Certainly, our obligations to the most vulnerable are paramount, and very few college students have suffered serious health outcomes from Covid-19. The loss of in-person schooling for pre-K and K-12 students had more obvious impact from a developmental standpoint, and also more inequitable effects. In comparison, college students missing out on some in-person classes and the full freedoms of residence hall life hardly sounds consequential.

College students have mostly upheld their end of the bargain during these covid years of lockdowns and sacrifices, now easing. In the process, they have missed out on much of a critical and irreplaceable phase of life, and we must focus on doing right by them.

To start, we should acknowledge to them that the first draft of history penned by the media as the pandemic began was deeply unfair to college students, casting them as vectors of disease who endangered surrounding communities.

When students returned to campus there was no doubt spread and not all followed the rules. But most did, most of the time, and many of the rules at many places in the march of the academic calendar beyond 2020 extended beyond easy reasonableness. The notion that students returning to campus somehow fueled the broader national case count --- compared to an imaginary universe where they stayed home and took classes online yet somehow stayed in their rooms and never caught or spread the virus --- never held up to close scrutiny. (Though they got

little attention, studies at Indiana University and the University of Illinois found that students taking more in-person courses were *less likely* to test positive than students taking courses online.) Here at Longwood, like everywhere, some in the local community were skeptical about our return in the fall of 2020. But the students were determined to keep the semester on track and not go home again. Their commitment to public health and protocols so outperformed expectations that our local paper, *The Farmville Herald*, ran an editorial halfway through the academic year titled “The College Students Showed Us The Way.”

If college students held up their end of the bargain, the record of institutions was mixed. The caution and hard stop in the spring of 2020 was obviously justified. By fall of 2020, and especially fall of 2021 when vaccines were available, some continued with counterproductive restrictions, while others --- with an insistent focus on students --- moved forward and modeled how institutions could adapt, with sensibly balanced policies that show a continuing way forward through this next, endemic stage of the virus, when the economic, educational and social costs of not moving forward with college life can no longer be justified. At Longwood, most of our courses returned to in-person instruction in fact in the fall of 2020 --- aided and guided by the great practical wisdom of the reopening plan for Virginia higher education crafted by SCHEV, VDH, and the Administration. The Virginia reopening plan was a model for the nation --- and in the annals of the Commonwealth it should be recorded as one of the most finely wrought works of Peter Blake and Fran Bradford.

In understanding what students have lost, it’s worthwhile to note how the residential nature of college proved to be what made success possible. In 2020, when colleges were regularly compared to petri dishes and cruise ships, it was widely assumed densely packed campuses would feed spread. But here at Longwood we found the opposite: the tools of being a

tight-knit community, where an honor code helped keep students accountable to one another, and an experienced Student Affairs staff was able to engage in prompt contact tracing and quarantine, provided benefits that far outweighed any disadvantage from housing destiny. A formal report to our board on how we navigated covid concluded “the residential nature and traditions” at Longwood and other institutions were not a weakness but “the essential strength that would carry them through.”

Still, while immensely proud that Longwood pushed forward, I cannot deny that even our students missed out on defining experiences amidst the inevitable diminishment of extracurricular life some of our restrictions imposed --- from dorm philosophizing over pizza to club sports to student organizations, and countless other aspects of the college experience that we supported as best we could but were inevitably curtailed.

So what, you might ask?

These experiences are not luxury items or extraneous extras. While unfortunately it can lose sight of this mission, higher education is the great engine that prepares each generation for democracy. We should remember the original meaning of the term “liberal arts” --- the skills needed by free citizens, the arts of liberty to maintain a democracy.

At a time when we are so politically and economically polarized, residential college campuses like Longwood are the last best hope young people have of regularly encountering people with different ideas and backgrounds. Here in Virginia we are especially polarized by geography --- economically and politically. Increasingly, there are two distinct Virginias whose inhabitants encounter one another in person less and less. In the 2021 gubernatorial election, almost half of all Virginia localities, 61, saw one candidate receive two-thirds of the vote or

more. Another 16 localities were 80 percent Democratic or Republican, up from just four two decades ago. Economically, the gap between Virginia's wealthiest county --- Loudoun, with a median family income \$142,000 --- and any of the state's 32 poorest counties is larger than you will find between the single richest and single poorest county in any other state.

If democracy and citizenship require empathy and common understanding, residential college matters if we are to have any hope of knitting back together our tattered democracy. The student bodies of our residential college campuses are, for the most part, more diverse than almost any other part of society in terms of race, wealth, and partisan inclination. And yet Americans are opting out of college in profoundly alarming numbers. Undergraduate enrollment nationwide has fallen 6.6 percent since 2019 – a decline of more than 1 million students. If the trend continues, the strength of America's diverse array of colleges and universities will truly begin to wane --- and significantly fewer young people will experience the preparation for citizenship residential higher education provides, at a moment of self-evident crisis when it's urgently needed. If we do not reinforce college, and do not reinforce college's focus on democracy, we will reap what we sow.

We must get those students back into higher education. And when we do, we must recommit to our mission of preparing citizens for democracy, taking care as we address the academic consequences of these past years not to forget to invest in and reinvigorate the residential experience. Far from a luxury, this part of college is essential to its formative power for citizenship. It is profoundly good that today's seniors are seeing the life of campus, with its habits of democracy, in fuller and fuller measure again, and at last, now.

This century is not so new anymore, but care-worn and troubled. In these fulcrum years already, so many have sacrificed and lost so much. The rising generation has been bearing their own share. We owe them our respect, and urgency in caring for them too. They need us, and we need them.