



September, 2019

Dear Colleagues,

Fall term is underway! The celebration at Colloquy of the accomplishments of our outstanding distinguished educators and endowed chairs was really inspiring. Each year I look at the folks on stage and think, “Wow, these people are the all-stars of UR; they do such amazing things.” Then the next year brings a whole new set of people and I think the same. That is now three years in a row and I don’t see the bottom of the pool — the depth and breadth of quality of our faculty and staff are remarkable and energizing.

Recently, faculty members in the [Program for Academic Leadership \(PAL\)](#) were asked to respond anonymously to the question, “What do you value about your work as a professor?” The top three answers were:

- Positive impact on students now and in the future
- Creative thinking/knowledge creation
- Smart committed colleagues

These answers speak to why we are making progress on our aim to offer the best liberal arts education in the country. Exceptional student-centered teaching and creativity and knowledge creation are critical to our educational mission as a leading national institution. The rallying point for our entire very talented community — staff and faculty alike — is a focus on preparing students “for lives of purpose.”

I recognize that the work our faculty and staff regularly take on is considerable. We have been active on many fronts in the last couple of years implementing the strategic plan that our community envisioned and proposed. Looking ahead we want to focus our efforts even more. As President Crutcher has noted in a number of forums, we are prioritizing **student quality and success, academic excellence, and engaged community**. In the academic space for the coming year that focus can be summarized as **students, faculty, curriculum**.

Students

The enrollment and admissions team has done fabulous work attracting one of the most academically talented classes ever this year. We will remain focused on recruiting another great class in the coming year.

These students come from very different backgrounds and if we are to succeed we have to appreciate that and make sure all are included regardless of their gender, race, abilities, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and political views. Doing so makes us a stronger intellectual community — one that is more vibrant, more creative, and harder working. Thanks to the efforts of so many last year we have a concrete roadmap in this area. If you have not yet, please see the [Making Excellence Inclusive report](#) — it builds on a variety of prior work that is critical to student success (e.g., the [Inclusive Pedagogy Initiative](#)).

Through our [Office of Scholars and Fellowships](#), we will further support our students who are applying for and winning national awards. Please do encourage your students to pursue these opportunities. And through other UR offices, we will also be working with those students who are struggling to stay enrolled and help them graduate as Spiders.

Faculty

We know that what makes the biggest difference in our students' educational experience are faculty and staff commitment and engagement. Our teacher-scholar model *is* incredibly demanding and we will be focusing on attracting and retaining talented faculty and ensuring our faculty have the support they need.

This year that will involve improving our search processes to find the best teacher scholars and examining ways to support faculty and preserve time for their core work. As you know, the [Teaching and Scholarship Hub](#) is taking shape under the leadership of Linda Boland with a renewed focus on support for teaching and scholarship. Many of us are placing great hopes on the Hub but it will take time for Linda and her team to get organized and develop programs. Please be patient but do pass on your advice, needs, and insights to the Hub.

Note too that in the coming year the Faculty Senate is examining Senate committee service with an eye to efficiency and equity.

Curriculum

Our continuing academic excellence also requires building on our great **curriculum** to match the changing nature and needs of our students and the world before them.

Faculty will be taking the lead in this area with a committee looking at a possible reform of our General Education Curriculum. This is an exciting and really important effort. Our general education is:

- A cornerstone of our curriculum that involves up to 1/3 of the classes students take at UR.
- A common experience that helps define a Richmond education and our ability to prepare students for lives of purpose.
- According to the faculty [Gen Ed Review committee](#) last year, in need of greater purpose, coherence, and integration.

I encourage you to read [the report](#) and engage with the committee's efforts this year. This is by our shared governance, a faculty responsibility. They need your wisdom and specific knowledge of what is best for the education of our students.

We will also be looking at ways to support further strengthening or integrating existing programs. Here I have in mind:

- some of our cross-school programs that are in high demand: For example, we have seen a rapid increase in interest in data analytics and quantitative science from across our schools. We are jointly advertising the searches going on this year and will be looking at what else we can do in this area in terms of building faculty and coordinating shared interests. Look for new activities in [Creativity-Innovation-Entrepreneurship](#) as well.
- linking high impact experiences like living learning communities, study abroad, and internships. These efforts, many of which build on existing strengths, will not necessarily be glamorous but are important. A new first-year experience will be a key gateway.

Effective education is seldom static. We do our work in the context of changing students, new challenges in the world, and competition for the best students and faculty. We are doing really well on all these fronts. But we do need to be attentive to our broader environment. This year we will begin a regular schedule of external reviews of our departments, programs, and units aligning with already scheduled internal reviews where possible. External reviews are a best practice and a number of our departments and schools already do them. This kind of external review every 10 years can provide critical information to support our aspirations.

I hope you have read in the above clear priorities that focus on our core purpose — the thing that is the heart of our community: effectively preparing students for lives of purpose. We will get there by keeping a focus on basics: students, of course, and building on our academic excellence in terms of faculty, staff, and curriculum. Effectively educating students does not and cannot happen without an engaged community; it will require all of us working together.

The Provost's Office will be out and about meeting with every academic department or school (when they do not have departments) in the coming year. I look forward to hearing from you then or at any time — please feel free to set up an appointment with me or join me in the Heilman Dining Center for lunch.

Best wishes for a fulfilling year!

Sincerely,

Jeffrey W. Legro
Executive Vice President and Provost