

University Colloquy
August 19, 2020

As an undergrad studying in Moscow, I woke before dawn on November 4, 1980 to travel across the city to the US Embassy to watch presidential election returns. The results were early and clear that day: Ronald Reagan would become the next President. At the time, Reagan had run a campaign that promised a hard confrontational line towards the archenemy Soviet Union. On the cold gray streets of the Russian capital that morning, fear of what lay ahead in a dangerous Cold War was palpable. *Might this antagonism lead to a devastating use of nuclear weapons, intentional or otherwise?*

That question both angered and frightened me. To a young 20-year-old, the question seemed more important than any other. Over time, it literally shaped my identity, transforming an interest in business into one in international affairs, and guiding my scholarship for many years. I still think about that question to this day.

Questions are important at all times, but in conditions of uncertainty and challenge they are critical. At their best, questions are transformative.

The actress, writer, and civil rights activist Ruby Dee offered this piece of wisdom: *“The greatest gift is not being afraid to question.”* In these past five months, we have had to question and reconsider everything we do.

I want to thank you for all the questions you have asked – difficult questions, probing questions, thoughtful questions. Your questions are a gift: they have made our preparations for this semester much better, our teaching more dynamic, and the health and wholeness of our community more secure.

Looking ahead, there is turbulence and uncertainty as far as the eye can see. No doubt in your different subject areas you are reexamining what questions matter and teaching students to do the same. This morning I want to address three questions fundamental to our essential purpose as a University and our future.

1) Will A Richmond Education Change?

COVID conditions have highlighted the importance of individual student attention, mentoring, and classroom engagement, but they have also raised new questions as institutions move on-line, families pay more attention to costs, and schools experiment with schedules, course delivery, and curricula. How will this shape what we do and how we do it?

A University of Richmond education will remain among the best anywhere. But we are now engaged in a huge experiment and there is a question as to how our distinctive educational principles translate in an environment where in-person interaction is constrained, altered, or impossible. This experimentation – the innovation taking place here through teaching in a variety of formats and modes of delivery, with new techniques both online and in person – will yield valuable lessons that will serve us this year and for years to come. We would be wise to pay close attention.

Of course, it is easy to see that a Richmond education has always been evolving, and in a direction of strength thanks to the concerted efforts of past and present members of our community. In the year before us this change could take a concrete form in areas such as consideration of possible reforms/additions to our general education curriculum, planning to take advantage of the new Humanities Commons that will be part of Ryland, coordinated data analytics courses, and continuing to advance a diverse and inclusive intercultural community.

As we work through the semesters, we will need to continue to do what we do well while also keeping an eye on the possibilities of transformation wrought by the experiences of 2020 and the essential role a liberal arts education will play in meeting the challenges of our time.

2) How Can Our Community Weather This Crisis?

Let's start with the crisis. It is about a pandemic and it is about racial justice and it is about the ways the two intersect with the pandemic exposing further the structural inequalities that exist in our society.

Great challenges can bring communities together or erode them. Consider the record to date in this tumultuous 2020.

- In January the campus was rocked by racist and xenophobic incidents. The response was an unprecedented campus rally to support students and thriving and inclusion efforts. And that work has continued, even while contending with a global pandemic.
- When COVID hit in March, we united in a massive effort to switch to remote learning and support our students as they transitioned home and finished the semester online – it was not always pretty, but we completed the academic year -- together.
- This summer the University has undertaken an extraordinary planning effort involving students, staff, and faculty. This has involved a much deeper and regular set of conversations than the University has ever had with multiple town halls, university faculty and staff meetings and on-line gatherings of students and parents that fostered questions, dialogue, and discussion.

How are we going to weather this year as a community? I believe we will do it well.

That, however, does not mean we will always agree. There will be debate. There will be disagreement. Each of us will continue to ask hard questions. To the uninitiated, community may in fact seem strained if not impossible among academics who have been trained in different disciplinary perspectives to question prevailing assumptions and ideas. In fact, that is what makes our campus community strong. Thriving academic communities depend on hard questions. Ironically amidst this questioning we are unified by a mutual respect for difference, for different expertise, and our shared commitment to students.

And we advance through embracing hard questions and fostering difficult conversations – consider for example questions of racism, diversity and inclusion. For some time, the University has made steady progress in welcoming more people from different backgrounds, identities, and experiences in our community and developing a culture that welcomes, celebrates, and attends to the needs, interests, and growth of each of its students.

In the past year, we have completed another cycle of gains in hiring a diverse faculty, established a new University structure for advancing this work, opened a new student multicultural space, improved our recruitment and hiring processes, taken on DEI conversations and plans in units across the campus, expanded an ambitious inclusive pedagogy program, work with and by students on racism and anti-racism, advanced research and knowledge of a burial ground of enslaved people and steps to memorialize it, and declared Juneteenth a university holiday. And we know this is not nearly enough.

I share these mile markers not to indicate we have somehow arrived, but rather to give a mid-journey report. There is plenty of road ahead. As we have already experienced, there will be setbacks, friction, and frustration about progress. Still, the presence and flourishing of different voices and perspectives in our community is a wellspring of our vitality and we will continue our work with humility and care.

So even as we take on difficult and sometimes uncomfortable topics, the answer to the question of how we weather this crisis might be found in the repeated refrain of a poem about UR by graduating senior Erika Echternach:

“Despite countless uncertainties,
our community remains
– near or remote.

We are stronger than we imagined.

Now is when we realize what can never be taken from us,
as we jump into the unknown.”

3) How Can We Best Support Our Students?

Our calling is to educate students. The effort this summer by faculty and staff in preparing for our students and the fall has been astonishing. Thank you. To give you a sense of that effort in terms of teaching preparation, over 325 individual faculty as of August 6 had taken part in courses or training for remote and blended learning and there have been more group sessions since then. 95 faculty registered for Associated Colleges of the South pedagogy workshops in August – the most of any school in that consortium. This participation is tremendous and demonstrates once again the dedication of this faculty to supporting students in these trying times.

I want to acknowledge the incredible efforts of our staff colleagues from every area of the University who have done so much to ready us: communications, admission, HR, facilities, IS, student development, IFX and beyond, who have adapted, adjusted, and worked overtime to prepare for the fall semester. THANK you – your work has made all the difference.

A special thanks go to Linda Boland and the Faculty Hub team for their extraordinary work this past year and especially this summer. The importance of faculty development has never been clearer and going forward the Hub will continue to evolve to support the needs of our faculty. When you are in our ever-dynamic library this fall, please keep an eye out for the Hub's new location and space that will be finished in coming weeks.

Most important in supporting our students is to continue what makes a Richmond education exceptional. In a recent rankings guide a Richmond student said this: "I know it's hard to believe, but every student here has at least one professor they have this special kind of mentorship with." Mentoring, engaging students in shared research and creative work, bringing scholarship into the classroom, applying knowledge to the real world – those all take huge time and effort. Many faculty express a sense of being overstretched and -- that was true well before our current crisis.

We hear you.

Today I would like to announce an effort to provide more time for faculty to ask and answer big questions that support student learning. We will be launching a new Faculty Fellows program to nurture and sustain the work of our professors in continuing to provide these influential educational opportunities. The Faculty Fellows Program will be an ongoing competitive course release program for tenured faculty in the traditional undergraduate schools. It is designed to sustain our distinctive education by assisting professors in meeting the many demands of classroom teaching and scholarly and creative work and bringing that research and creativity to their students' learning. The Program will involve a two-course reduction to occur between

sabbaticals. We will be developing and sharing further additional details in coming weeks. I am grateful to Sandra Joireman, the P&P committee and Deans for their efforts to bring this program to life.

I end with the most important way that questions and our circumstances intersect. That is the ability of your disciplines and your expertise to speak to the challenges we face, how to live in this moment, and how build a better society in the future. Big questions loom before us related to virus transmission and prevention, structures of racism, the history of protest and government reform, economic shocks and recovery, and living a good and purposeful life. Our students will be inspired by this moment to study and prepare to change the world – just as I was many years ago. And we, all of us, faculty and staff working together, will provide them all the support and guidance we can, as best we can, in this year like no other.

I wish you all a year of great questions. It is a critical time to ask hard ones. Doing so inside and outside the classroom – even without clear answers – may be the greatest gift, even a transformative one, to the long-term vitality of the University, to the development of our community, to the advancement of disciplines, and most important, to the education of our students.

Godspeed in the semester ahead.