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## **The Virginia Citizenship Initiative:**

### **The Road to Deregulation, Real Accountability, and Renewed Citizenship in Virginia's System of Higher Education**

**By: Eric Cohen**

#### **Executive Summary**

#### **A Time for Reform**

The state of Virginia is blessed with one of the finest systems of public colleges and universities in the nation. And yet, for these institutions to continue to thrive, they need the authority, expertise, and resources to govern themselves—to attract and keep the best faculty, to take full advantage of the latest technologies, to maintain and upgrade campus resources, and to pursue their specific missions in the most effective way.

For too long, Virginia's colleges and universities have been hindered by unnecessary statewide regulations on procurement, personnel, property management, and financial management. The purpose of these regulations is to ensure accountability and efficiency. But the result has been to thwart hands-on management, stifle creativity, waste time, and increase costs.

#### **The SCHEV Performance Funding Model—A Better Way**

The State Council of Higher Education of Virginia (SCHEV) Performance Funding Model is a significant step toward greater self-government and greater *real* accountability for Virginia's colleges and universities. The proposal has four key strengths:

##### **Strength #1: Funding the Mission**

The SCHEV proposal guarantees that every institution will have the resources to thrive by meeting or increasing the present budget of every public college or university in its 2000-2002 recommendations.

##### **Strength #2: Self-Government**

The SCHEV proposal relieves colleges and universities of unnecessary state micromanagement. It gives institutions and their leaders the authority to govern themselves—to manage their own

resources and personnel, to retain control of investment income and accumulated balances, and in general to plan for the future through sound financial management and academic vision.

**Strength #3: Steady Investment**

In the SCHEV proposal, funding takes the form of a block grant—that is, an institution-specific budget appropriation that funds each college's core mission without over regulating how individual institutions allocate those funds. The proposal builds into its recommendations an automatic annual adjustment for inflation. That means that every college will receive steady and sufficient funding—unless it repeatedly and drastically fails to achieve its mission.

**Strength #4: Real Accountability, Real Reward**

The SCHEV proposal connects future higher education investment to academic performance—understood as how well institutions accomplish their specific missions. The proposal establishes a set of performance indicators—graduation rates, retention rates, success on professional tests and job placement, faculty productivity, and transition rates for community college students—that are institution-specific. Every college and university is measured for how well it is doing in meeting its particular goals and serving its particular students. Each institution has its own target success rates and outcomes against which its actual performance is measured. These performance measures are then used as the basis for all-incremental and additional funding. In short, resources follow success.

**The Virginia Citizenship Initiative**

Higher education policy in Virginia should strive not only to make institutions efficient and accountable, but to connect higher education to the responsibility of citizenship. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this means accounting for the complexity—and therefore the institutional diversity—of the world of higher education, while at the same time promoting and preserving the common thread of citizenship. It means balancing dynamism and tradition, entrepreneurship and permanence, free enterprise and an unbending commitment to Virginia's public institutions.

A vision for Virginia higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century built on the ideal of citizenship should center on the following seven *principles*:

***Principle #1:*** The public has a stake in its institutions of higher learning and in its students because it has a stake in citizenship, and because only an educated people can truly govern themselves and build and preserve a more just, more prosperous nation.

***Principle #2:*** Public education at the high school level should provide rudimentary education in reading, mathematics, critical thinking, and citizenship, while college and university education is for leadership, whatever the field.

***Principle #3:*** Individual colleges and universities should have the authority to do great things, but they must take full responsibility for their fates instead of begging every year for more funding while continuing to operate based on static assumptions.

**Principle #4:** Students are best able to weigh their own academic needs and ambitions, and therefore the costs and benefits of particular programs.

**Principle #5:** While the state benefits from well-educated students, so do the students themselves, who gain life-long personal, social, and economic benefits, and who must therefore bear some of the cost of their education.

**Principle #6:** Higher education is not a right, but both a privilege and a responsibility. And while students must bear some of the costs for such a great privilege, the state should subsidize them for accepting the responsibility of leadership as citizens of Virginia.

**Principle #7:** Because the Commonwealth has invested in them, students have a responsibility to take their education seriously. All subsidies, therefore, should be contingent on academic performance and community service.

As a prescription for *public policy*, this could be called the *Virginia Citizenship Initiative*. It could have three main components: Citizenship Vouchers, Citizenship Education Grants, and a statewide Forum on Technology, Liberal Education, and Citizenship.

#### **Policy #1: Citizenship Vouchers**

A true marketplace tends to do two things: It improves an existing function while lowering the cost; and it creates new opportunities that require a high initial investment but that offer an even higher payoff.

By allocating a portion of public higher education funding *directly to students*, the state could promote both citizenship and accountability. These Citizenship Vouchers—combined with deregulation that allows colleges and universities to govern themselves—would create a system of higher education that is institutionally diverse: Some schools may decide to focus on liberal education, character education, and so forth and see less of a need to invest in high-tech or state of the art facilities. Or they might make targeted investments in technology to improve quality and cut costs. Still other institutions may invest heavily in high-tech or in new programs, and raise tuition accordingly, showing students that the benefits outweigh the cost. The common thread will be the shared commitment to citizenship—the idea that a community of educated individuals, given the opportunity and resources to pursue their callings, is the best recipe for a just, decent, productive society.

In a system that funds both students and institutions—students through vouchers, institutions through block grants—the state could play the role of friendly investor: It could hold colleges and universities accountable through various performance and outcome measures, while at the same time creating an academic marketplace by empowering students and families. Moreover—and perhaps most importantly—it could hold students accountable by connecting vouchers to academic success (e.g.—a minimum GPA) and public service (e.g.—elementary and secondary school tutoring, military service, community service at local nonprofits). Such a program would connect subsidies to citizenship. And further, by limiting vouchers to public colleges and

universities, the state would guarantee that its public institutions—especially the ones that are most innovative, most effective, and most vigorous at educating students and creating opportunities—would continue to thrive.

### **Policy #2: Citizenship Education Grants**

Good citizenship requires a sound understanding of the nation’s basic principles—self-government, religious toleration, equality of opportunity, and what Thomas Jefferson called “republican character.” The state could create a competition for the best courses in American citizenship, history, and political philosophy. Faculty and departments from all of the state’s public colleges and universities could apply each year. A panel of leading scholars, public servants, and business leaders from across the state could decide the best courses. The state could then give the winners funding to teach the winning courses at their respective universities but also offer it statewide online. This would promote citizenship education without a one-size-fits all government mandate, and it would give students across the state access to the best, most innovative professors.

### **Policy #3: The Virginia Forum on Technology, Liberal Education, and Citizenship**

Virginia could create a series of seminars—both for four-year university students and community college students—on the topic of Technology, Liberal Education, and Citizenship. Students from across the state could apply to participate, and the winners could attend a conference with leading scholars, businessmen, public servants, military officers, and community leaders, who would all come together to consider the great questions of the day, the future of Virginia, and the demands and opportunities of the rising generation. Not only would such an event serve as a useful networking opportunity for students, it would help them consider what it means to be a good citizen of ‘republican character.’”

Now is the time for decisive leadership in setting a course for the 21<sup>st</sup> century academy in Virginia. The opportunities—and challenges—are too great not to act.

#### **About the Author**

Eric Cohen is Managing Editor of *The Public Interest*, a quarterly journal of social and political thought.

Mr. Cohen was a Fulbright Scholar at the College of the Humanities in Ottawa, where he taught philosophy and delivered a series of lectures on liberal education in the modern world. He graduated Summa Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Williams College in Massachusetts where he received his degree in Social Thought.

Mr. Cohen is a prolific writer who has had articles published in several magazines and newspapers-- including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Weekly Standard*, the *Washington Times*, the *Indianapolis Star*, and the *Intercollegiate Review*. He serves as a Fellow with the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy.