

OPINIONS

Richmond Times-Dispatch

A Lee Enterprises, Incorporated Newspaper -
Majority shareholder, David Hoffmann, Hoffmann Media Group
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THE COST OF OVERREACH

Board overreach driving Virginia's presidents away

The institutions that comprise Virginia's higher education system are known nationally for their commitment to academic excellence and contributions to the social, political and scientific life of the commonwealth and the nation. However, in recent years, what Virginia higher education is increasingly known for is the turnover

of successful presidents who are stepping down, or being pushed out, at an alarming rate due to fractured relationships with the very governing boards charged with partnering with them to serve their institutional missions.

Media reporting and a recent Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges survey point to a significant gap in trustee understanding of their fiduciary responsibilities and appropriate boundaries between governance and management. This lack of understanding creates the conditions in which board overreach is normalized, driving effective presidents out the door and jeopardizing institutional health across a broad range of categories — not least the ability to attract, hire and retain well-qualified leaders.

College and university presidents in Virginia and beyond are increasingly facing untenable positions with a convergence of political pressures, activist stakeholders, donor expectations, campus crises and governance dysfunction. The job isn't getting any easier, and working with a governing board determined to overstep its role and involve itself in a range of management and operational decisions isn't helping, especially when that overreach is driven by a particular political agenda. This behavior is not governance; it's shadow management that does not serve the institution's mission, and it is driving talented leaders away.

Governing boards have distinct and unique roles. They are responsible for hiring the president, advancing the institutional mission, providing fiduciary oversight, evaluating institutional performance and working in partnership with the president to chart the institution's future course. Presidents are charged with managing the institution, leading the cabinet, supervising personnel, implementing strategy and responding to crises, all in fidelity to the institution's mission and values. Presidents cannot effectively lead when every operational decision is subject to second-guessing by trustees, especially those who are motivated more by serving a political agenda than by serving the institutional mission or who lack the curiosity, context or boundaries necessary for effective governance.

When governing boards do not understand or respect their boundaries, they are setting the stage for leadership turnover, which creates profound strategic and reputational risk

for institutions. Long-term initiatives become stalled, donors hesitate to give, faculty and staff become disengaged, recruitment of students and employees suffers, and institutional culture deteriorates. Students also suffer the consequences as institutions plagued by governance dysfunction inevitably shift their focus away from teaching, learning, student support and innovation, instead becoming consumed with internal politics and leadership survival.

Many higher education board members are accomplished professionals in their fields who come to their board service armed only with what they remember of their own college experience. This combination does not necessarily translate to effective governance in higher education. Colleges and universities are complex organizations with important shared governance traditions, academic freedom standards, public accountability obligations and accreditation requirements.

Trustees who come to higher education governance believing they should "run the institution like a business" often underestimate this complexity. A university president is not a middle manager reporting to an active operating committee; a governing board is not an executive management team. Effective governance requires discipline, restraint and clarity of role.

If Virginia wants to attract and keep effective leaders, boards must recommit to their original purpose: fiduciary duty and stewardship of institutional mission. State leaders and governing authorities should prioritize governance competency over political alignment when making appointments. Trustee orientation and training cannot be ceremonial; it must focus on fiduciary duty and the effective principles of trusteeship. Additionally, board chairs must understand their unique role and ensure boundaries between the board and management are upheld. These recommendations comprise the AGB Higher Education Governance Integrity Initiative, a nonpartisan state-level framework for effective governance reform.

Governing boards need to realize that successfully attracting and retaining talented leaders is often directly correlated with their own board effectiveness. Institutional success is contingent on talented leaders who can make tough decisions in difficult times and feel they won't be punished by a dysfunctional board for doing so.

Virginia's colleges and universities deserve stable leadership and governing boards that understand their proper role, and they won't get one without the other.

Ross A. Mugler is president and CEO of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. Mugler is also the longest-serving board member at a single Virginia institution, having been appointed to Old Dominion University's Board of Visitors by five governors and serving as rector of the university. He can be reached at presidentoffice@agb.org.

THE MAKING OF MONUMENTS

American fiction on a pedestal

A statue of a fictional boxer, arms upraised in triumph, rises above a statue of George Washington from a perch atop the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Further up Benjamin Franklin Parkway, a



MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS

statue of William Penn towers above Philadelphia City Hall.

The fictional boxer, of course, is Rocky Balboa of "Rocky" movie fame. And his statue, as a visitor attraction, dwarfs the monuments to the "Father of His Country" and the founder of Pennsylvania.

Paul Farber, guest curator of "Rising Up: Rocky and the Making of Monuments," a splendid show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, said in an interview Wednesday that four million people a year visit the Rocky statue, "which is double the Liberty Bell, five times the amount that goes into the museum. Four million is like Statue of Liberty numbers."

Coming from Richmond, I thought I knew the full power of monuments and mythology. But the Rocky statue's relative popularity, in a historic city foundational to the American story, astonished me.

Fiction, in this case, is more compelling than truth.

The appearance of the Rocky statue outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art is a case of life imitating art. A scene in the 1982 sequel "Rocky III" features the statue's unveiling in the museum's courtyard. Sylvester Stallone subsequently presented the statue to the city of Philadelphia.

During my recent trip to the City of Brotherly Love, this Rocky statue appeared as popular as ever, even as a placeholder. The original Rocky statue is on display inside the museum for the first time as part of the "Rising Up" exhibition. It will be permanently installed atop the museum steps after the show's conclusion in August.

Farber, as curator, was determined to understand the statue's magnetism. What he learned challenged his preconceptions.

"It wasn't just travelers and visitors," he said. "Because I met people from all across Philadelphia of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. I found LGBTQ visitors. I found people from different immigrant communities." He met people, often enduring difficulties in their lives, who traveled from far away to see the statue and identified with its underdog spirit. Their pilgrimages "give us an insight into our crises of disconnection and grief in our culture. Here is a place where broad numbers of people feel seen," he said.

On the other hand, "the most famous Philadelphian who never lived is a mythical white boxer in a city of real Black boxers in a city and a country that consistently has fictionalized our monument landscape" at the expense of a truer, fuller history, he said.

His takeaway, beyond folks' hunger to be recognized and acknowledged, and their identification with the emotions embodied in the statue's pose, was: "We love all of our history fictionalized, not just this Hollywood one."

He concluded that he could learn a lot about the Rocky statue from the people who line up around it, "and what it tells us about our relationship



MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS, TIMES-DISPATCH

The enduring magnetism of Philadelphia's Rocky statue reveals how Americans cling to myth over history, exposing a monument culture that celebrates fiction while sidelining the fuller, more complicated truths that actually define us, writes Michael Paul Williams.

to monuments as places where myth and history are entangled. That's not just about Rocky, that's about our entire monument landscape."

In Richmond — a place Farber is familiar with as the director and co-founder of the nonprofit Monument Lab — we know all too well about the entanglement of myth and history as the former host of numerous monuments to the Lost Cause.

Whether we're talking Rocky or Robert E. Lee, is it healthy to attach civic identity to myth or outright fiction?

"My shorthand answer is it is not healthy to perpetuate lies," Farber said. "But I actually think monuments are far more about power than they are about memory."

One memory he'd like to see highlighted is Philadelphia's legacy as a boxing city second to none. The exhibition includes a map of boxing-related sites.

Philadelphia boxing legends Joe Frazier, Bernard Hopkins, Matthew Saad Muhammad and Bennie Briscoe are honored at the Boxers' Trail in Fairmount Park, where Frazier would train and — Philly legend has it — Muhammad Ali would visit to challenge the man who vanquished him in a 1971 bout billed as "The Fight of the Century." The gym of Frazier — who had a cameo in "Rocky III" — is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Still, the city's Black boxers haven't gotten their due, Farber said. "They're not emblazoned on tour buses, or their names aren't elevated in the same ways as the Hollywood story."

The Frazier statue by Stephen Layne, located at the South Philadelphia Sports Complex, will be installed at Rocky's former site at the base of the museum steps. That's a long-overdue step in the right direction. But no monument can be a cure-all for past wrongs or neglect.

"I do think, to be very clear, every monument in some ways is a work of fiction," Farber said. "Because even if you're dealing with an actual historical figure who dealt in that time, history does not operate because one dude rolls into town on a horse and looks off into the distance, or a boxer runs up civic steps and pauses."

But while he isn't giving the Rocky statue a pass in this regard, it's no Confederate monument.

"I think the difference between Richmond and Philadelphia ... I think of the Lost Cause in particular and the kind of building up of a narrative of whitewashing the Civil War as part of a profound national crisis that cuts across so many different sectors," he said. "What I think brings them together is we like our history served on a fictional platter, so to speak."

Serving up history in this way comes at a cost, said Farber, who argues that we should aspire to the fullest, most humanistic history possible. "We've gotten so accustomed to thinking that history lives inside a statue on top of a pedestal and not between people across time and in struggle."

The exhibition points out that boxing has always been political. "Italian American boxers such as Rocky Marciano and Joey Giardello challenged ethnic prejudices. Black boxers like Jack Johnson confronted Jim Crow violence within and beyond the ring, while Joe Louis's 1938 bout with German Max Schmeling propelled him onto the global stage as a symbol of resistance to fascism on the eve of World War II." In that context, Rocky can be seen as "part of that history" of the search for a Great White Hope, Farber said.

The exhibition references a bout between Tom Molineaux, born enslaved in Virginia, and English champion Tom Cribb in the early 1800s. The story of boxing is entangled in enslavement and migration, Farber said. "The politics of boxing are about what happens in the ring and outside the ring."

If people are interrogating this history, the museum exhibition is functioning as designed.

"I'm glad that people debate how a Rocky statue went from being a film prop to a civic monument," Farber said. "I just wish we put that same critical gaze on the actual monuments that are commissioned, including those and especially those to the Lost Cause and other pernicious narratives, because they, too, were props."

America's history will not advance us until we remove it from its pedestal, strip it of its Hollywood trappings, and fashion it from truth.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Chesterfield needs to catch up on affordable housing

Against the backdrop of a nationwide housing affordability crisis, which the city of Richmond underscored with a City Council declaration in 2024, it was interesting and disappointing to see no mention of affordable housing in either of the two June 3 Richmond Times Dispatch articles on newly planned large-scale RVA development projects (for the Best Products site in Henrico and Magnolia Green-adjacent projects in Chesterfield).

While the article was silent

on Henrico's affordable housing efforts, they are commendable. With data center revenues, Henrico has established a \$100 million fund to support affordable housing. The city's recent council ordinance, championed by Richmonders Involved to Strengthen our Communities (RISC), will dedicate 2.5% of real estate tax revenue to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Importantly, 30% of Trust Fund resources support deeply affordable housing for the city's poorest residents. This new funding complements the city's existing tax abatement program that has incentivized developers to build thousands of affordable

housing units in recent years.

What about Chesterfield County? Chesterfield is now the largest RVA jurisdiction by population, and in recent years has constructed more new housing than all the other local jurisdictions combined. It's time for Chesterfield to step up to the challenge of making RVA a place that offers affordable housing for all its residents.

David Evans
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