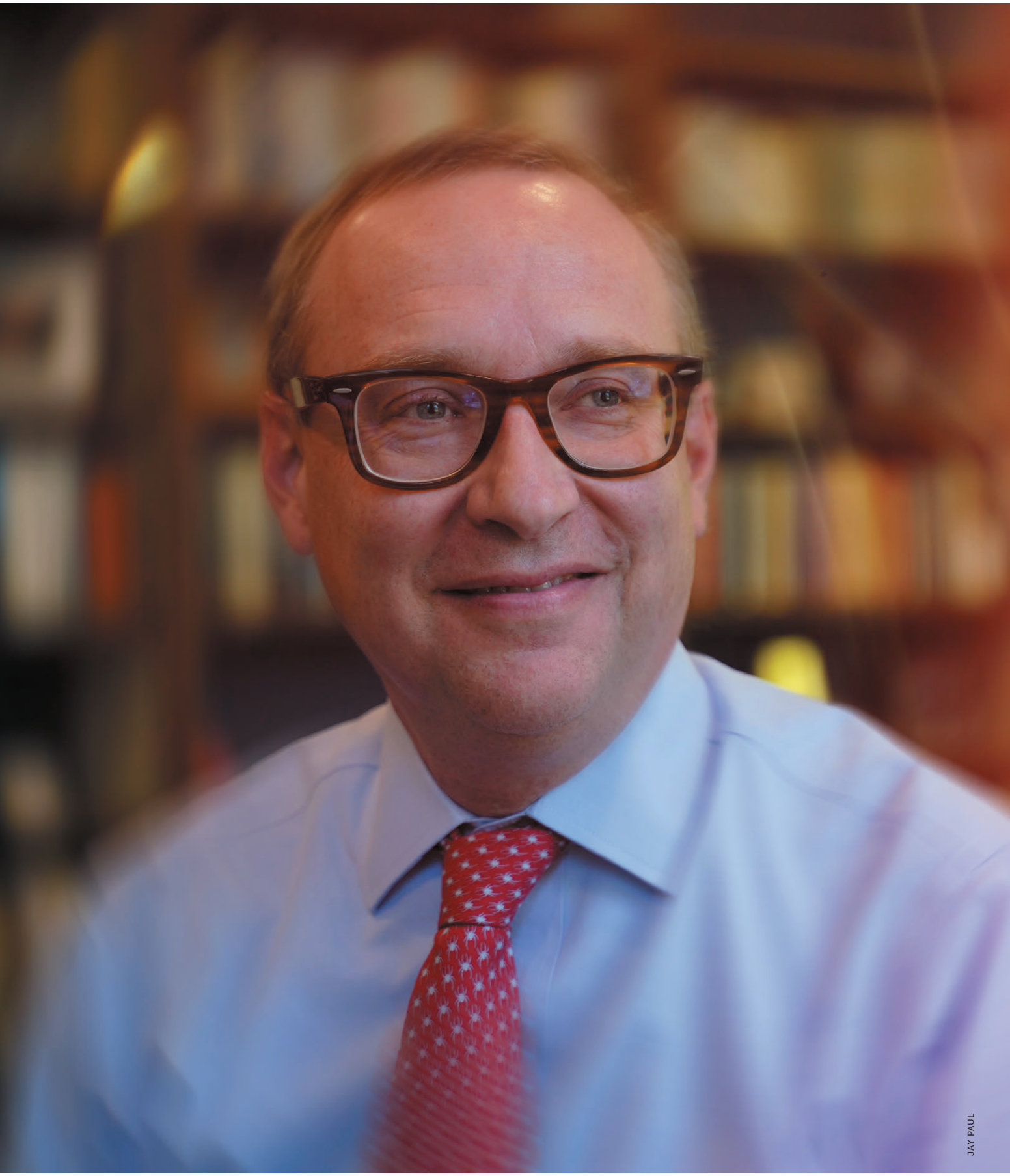
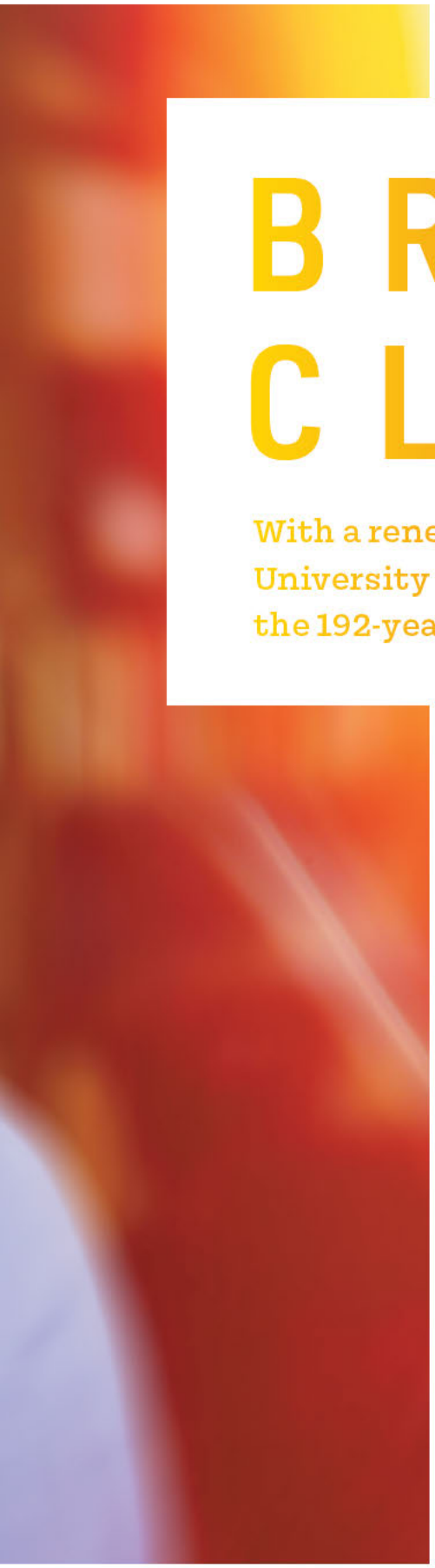


JAY PAUL

By Scott Bass

BREAKING CLOUDS

With a renewed vision of inclusivity, the University of Richmond's new president prepares the 192-year-old institution for its next chapter



KEVIN HALLOCK arrived in Richmond in the middle of a storm.

In February 2021, the turbulence was both literal and figurative for the former Cornell University business school dean. He was holed up in a Richmond hotel on West Broad Street preparing for a marathon of interviews with administrators, deans and members of the University of Richmond's board of trustees. The ice on the roads was thick and foreboding. "I was worried that I was going to actually still have to do all my interviews on Zoom because no one else could get to the hotel," Hallock recalls. The ice melted soon enough, and by all accounts the interviews went well. Hallock was named UR's 11th president just a few weeks later, on March 4.

A bigger storm, however, was gathering over UR's bucolic West End campus. Just a week before Hallock's hiring, the university's outgoing president, Ronald Crutcher, announced that the board of trustees had decided to keep the names of the university's slave-owning founder, Robert Ryland, and its former trustee and rector Douglas Southall Freeman, a newspaper editor who supported segregation, on two campus buildings. Amid a nationwide racial reckoning after the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020, UR's board had decided that removing the names would be a disservice to the university's "educational purpose."

"I firmly believe that removing Ryland's and Freeman's names would not compel us to do the hard, necessary and uncomfortable work of grappling with the university's ties to slavery and segregation," Crutcher wrote in a statement to faculty and students. "It would instead lead to further cultural and institutional silence and, ultimately, forgetting."

AN IDENTITY CRISIS

"Forgetting," it turns out, wouldn't be a problem. Students and faculty locked arms in disapproval as protests erupted on campus that spring. On social media, some alumni threatened to withhold donations. Making matters worse, during a meeting with faculty senate members and the staff advisory council ›

on March 26, 2021, UR's former rector, Paul Queally, said that removing the names would equate to "cancel culture." Queally questioned a staff member, a Black woman, commenting that she sounded "angry" and made an offhand reference to "Black, Brown and 'regular students,' " according to a statement signed by seven members of the faculty senate who attended the meeting. The faculty senate would later censure Queally, but it did little to quell growing dissent on campus.

The clouds were still hovering when Hallock took over as UR president in mid-August 2021, but the challenge in front of him was clear: The elite liberal arts college was struggling with an identity crisis. The 192-year-old private university, located on a former plantation that used enslaved labor and is home to a recently identified slave burial ground, needed to change.

An acclaimed labor economist known for having a calm, approachable demeanor, Hallock decided to slow the process down and gather as much community feedback as possible. It was an academic approach — do the research, absorb and listen — that stretched on for months.

"We started a commission in August and ... it had representatives from the students and staff and faculty, alumni, board — and that commission worked throughout the year," Hallock says. In response to student and faculty protest, the new Naming Principles Commission was established last May and began holding meetings later that summer. There were 24 hours of "listening sessions," Hallock recalls, and a survey of students, faculty and alumni that garnered 7,000 responses. "It was intentional to be open and deliberative, and inclusive of all kinds of voices. Not everybody agreed with these decisions, one way or the other, but I do think we had a fair and balanced and open process."

The board of trustees ultimately agreed to rename six buildings on campus, including Ryland and Freeman halls, while adopting guidelines for determining how and for whom buildings should be named. Most significant is Naming Principle No. 6: "No building, program, professorship, or other entity at the University should be named for a person who directly engaged in the trafficking and/or enslavement of others or openly advocated for the enslavement of people."

After two years of debate and protest, the University of Richmond got it right under Hallock's leadership, says Stephen Long, a professor of political science and global studies, and current president of the faculty senate.

"He came into a very difficult situation," Long says. "I give him credit for learning what was going on and reading the room very quickly." He adds that Hallock spent a lot of time listening to faculty and students. "He thinks very deliberatively about things, and he's very levelheaded."

A SENSE OF BELONGING

For Hallock, the naming controversy offered an important lesson. College campuses need to do a better job cultivating inclusivity, he says, while making higher education welcoming and accessible. For the University of Richmond, which has a reputation as an exclusive, mostly white prep school, Hallock has issued five "guiding lights" of strategic importance as he enters year two of his presidency. The first two are "access and affordability" and "belonging."

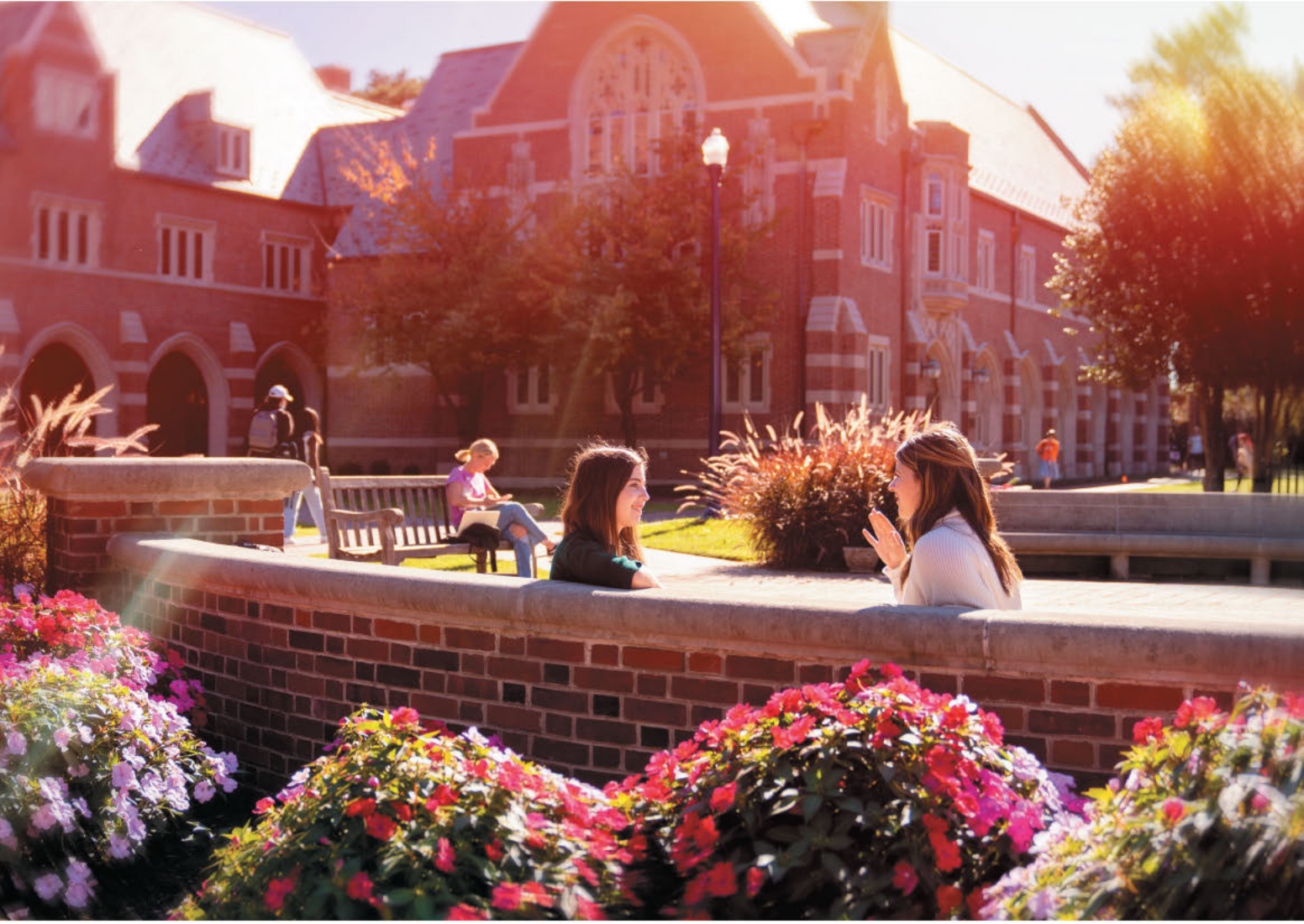
"I think it's hugely important. I actually think that there are a couple of huge issues in American higher education, and one of them is sense of belonging for people on campus," he says, adding that the real work is only just beginning. "Creating a sense of belonging where everyone feels welcome and comfortable [on campus] will be a signature part of my time here."

UR's academic reputation is well entrenched (it's ranked No. 22 among liberal arts colleges nationally, according to U.S. News & World Report), but it's also one of the most expensive. Tuition, room and board is $75,000 a year. While the university has a "need-blind" admission policy and promises to meet 100% of an undergraduate student's demonstrated need — for some students from lower-income families, this equates to almost full tuition — UR's high cost is seen by many as a barrier, especially for students from middle class families and minority students. It's grown more diverse over the years by attracting a growing number of international students, but it remains 59% white. Only 6% of students were Black in the fall 2021 enrollment count.

The university has done a good job of attracting and helping students from low-income families, Hallock says, along with students from wealthy families who can afford the full tuition, but he worries most about those in the middle. "I think there are people who don't think about coming here because they think it's too expensive,

"Creating a sense of belonging where everyone feels welcome and comfortable will be a signature part of my time here."

—Kevin Hallock, president, University of Richmond



Students relax in a courtyard near UR's Humanities Building, formerly Ryland Hall.

JAMIE BETTS/COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

when in fact it may not be if they apply and see what they get," Hallock says. "It's cheaper to go here for some families than it is to go to a state university."

UR's campus is also somewhat hidden. Routinely named one of the most beautiful campuses in the country (Princeton Review ranked the University of Richmond campus No. 1 in 2021), its rolling, tree-lined terrain and Collegiate Gothic-style architecture are befitting of the "eternal values" distilled by the founders of the university, which dates to 1830 as a Baptist seminary. Hallock wants to grow the university's connections with the surrounding community. A year after closing its downtown campus on East Broad Street due to the pandemic, Hallock is exploring expanding its reach into the city. He'd like students to spend a semester living downtown in the near future.

"A possibility would be to have a group of students living in the city, not just going down for a few hours," he says. It's a rough concept, one that he says needs to be well planned and wrapped around "academic content" in perhaps a multipurpose facility. The former downtown campus was more of a meeting space, an outpost for students to engage with the community.

Hallock rarely makes hasty decisions. Economists, he says, work in the margins. "If you move one little part of one thing, what might happen?" he explains, relating it to increasing tuition or increasing salaries. His life, in some respects, follows a similar deliberate pattern. From a small town in western Massachusetts, he met his future wife, Tina, when they were both 4 years old, and they started dating in high school. They've been together ever since.

After graduating from Princeton University with master's and doctoral degrees in economics, he spent 10 years teaching at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign before moving on to Cornell, where he worked his way into administrative roles over the next 16 years, most recently as dean of the SC Johnson College of Business. Throughout his career, Hallock has published more than 100 academic articles and 11 books, most in the field of labor economics.

"He works 15 hours a day, at least. He has boundless energy," says R. Lewis "Lew" Boggs, who took over as rector of UR's board of trustees after Queally stepped down at the end of June. Boggs says Hallock does his homework and moves with purpose. "I think we made a wise choice, and time will show that."

Hallock will also have plenty to work with. Despite the pandemic, the university has seen its investment portfolio expand considerably in the last two years. During fiscal year 2021, UR's endowment grew 39% to $3.3 billion. Hallock says that this considerable cushion will allow the university to grow its financial aid offerings and expand its academic programs.

"I think the university's trajectory is at a very positive inflection point," Hallock says. "The future is super bright. I'm delighted that I made the choice to come here." ■

READY TO RISE

Despite its rich history, Virginia State University is often overlooked. A young, energetic president is aiming to change that

BY SCOTT BASS • PHOTOS BY JAY PAUL

Fifty-three seconds. That's all it took for Virginia State University President Makola Abdullah to storm the Internet and land on ESPN.

It happened on March 16, 2021, just two days before the start of the NCAA men's basketball tournament. March Madness was in the air, and the video landed perfectly: A young student is prancing around campus with a basketball as he approaches the brick walkway in front of VSU's Foster Hall, which serves as the student commons on University Avenue, the campus' main street. He spins, dribbles between his legs and behind his back, juking a security guard, another student and a woman wearing heels and a long, red dress, as a friend films the encounters.

Enter Abdullah, wearing a suit and tie, who descends the front steps of the building. He's all business, moving with purpose, flanked by two administrators. The student, Afolabi Oyeneyin, confronts the VSU president, who immediately snatches the ball away. He takes off his sports jacket, a clear signal that the challenge has been accepted.

Like a business-casual Globetrotter, Abdullah playfully bounces the ball off Oyeneyin's forehead. He dribbles right, then quickly left, sending the ball between Oyeneyin's legs, before pushing the ball back to the right and causing Oyeneyin to stumble — "crossing him up" in basketball parlance. Nearby spectators begin to hoot and holler.

It's classic comeuppance. The old guy shows up the brash youngster. But Abdullah has a secret: It was all scripted. ›

Abdullah had contacted Oyeneyin a few months earlier after noticing previous videos he had filmed around campus. They were goofy and popular, and he figured doing something together would bring a little levity amid the pandemic. But he had no idea it would go "viral-viral." The video, posted on Twitter, wound up on ESPN's "SportsCenter" the same day. To date, it has been viewed 5.6 million times.

"He knew that the old guy crossing over the young guy would be something that old people would like, and that everybody older would believe it," Abdullah says, marveling at Oyeneyin's social media skills. "He knew it."

Abdullah, 53, is one of the youngest university presidents in the country. Academically, he's a wunderkind: a civil engineer who has published two dozen papers on the effects of earthquakes and extreme weather on tall buildings. He was all of 24 when he graduated with his Ph.D. from Northwestern University in 1994.

"Who the heck knows that now?" he says in his campus office in early May, more than a year after the video went viral. "I'm the guy who was in the crossover video. If you search my name, the top five things that pop up [on Google], that's who I am now."

Founded in 1882, Virginia State University is the state's oldest public historically Black college and university (HBCU), the first in the South to be established as a collegiate university for African Americans after the Civil War. It has one of the best agricultural programs in the state, a respected business school and an educational training program that partners with public school systems across the region. Academically, it's ranked among the top 30 HBCUs in the nation, according to U.S. News & World Report.

But it's often overlooked. Tucked away deep in southern Chesterfield County, in the village of Ettrick bordering Petersburg, VSU is located on a picturesque suburban campus just off U.S. Route 1 in Colonial Heights. It doesn't garner much media coverage and lacks the name recognition of Central Virginia's bigger schools — Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of Richmond. The region's other prominent HBCU — Virginia Union University — is arguably better known thanks to its location on Richmond's North Side.

When the spotlight does shine on VSU, it's often for the wrong reasons. Abdullah was named the university's 14th president in 2015 after the ouster of his predecessor, Keith T. Miller. In 2014, an unexpected enrollment decline of roughly 500 students set off a chain reaction: Money coming in from tuition and fees dropped by more than $4 million, thanks in part to tightening eligibility requirements for federal student loans, which led to losses in boarding revenue. The shortfall forced the closure of two residence halls, reductions in staff and faculty, and other budget cuts.

Students protested on campus, and former president Miller was forced to resign in December 2014. Pamela V. Hammond, former provost at Hampton University, took over the following January while the university conducted a national search to find new leadership.

Wayne Turnage, deputy mayor of health and human services in Washington, D.C., was appointed to the Board of Visitors in 2015. At the time, he says, the university was coming off "a string of bad press." In addition to the financial struggles, two students drowned in 2013 during a hazing ritual that involved crossing the rough waters of the Appomattox River, which borders the campus to the south. There was a student-on-student stabbing that October, and another VSU student had been fatally shot in the back just off campus in Ettrick.

"He had a pretty big wall to climb," Turnage says of Abdullah. "The school had a really, really rough path. There was not consistent, steady leadership."

Seven years later, the university is on a different path, Turnage says. VSU's year-end financial reserves have more than tripled under Abdullah, growing from roughly $17 million to $60 million. The endowment has grown from $40 million to $80 million, thanks mostly to a $30 million gift in 2020 from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott, ex-wife of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos.

With an infusion of state funding, VSU has more construction taking place on campus than at any point in its 140-year history, including a new 30,000-square-foot admissions building, a research and cooperative extension facility, new turf and other improvements at Rogers Stadium, and the crown jewel: a new $120 million Alfred W. Harris Academic Commons, which will span 174,000 square feet and include a theater, exhibition space and a swimming pool along with academic classrooms.

Abdullah, who initiated an update to the university's master plan in 2017, is steering Virginia State in a new direction, says Joyce Henderson, executive director of VSU's real estate foundation, which owns the University Apartments in Ettrick near Chesterfield Avenue. He wants to expand the university's footprint in Ettrick and its academic reputation in the region, attracting more local students who might not have otherwise considered attending Virginia State, including white and Hispanic students.

"With him at the helm, there's no reason the vision won't be realized — you know, the vision of continued growth," Henderson says.

In fall 2021, VSU's enrollment grew by 7% to 4,300 students, and early spring deposits for the fall 2022 semester are up significantly compared to 2021.

"I'm trying not to say the number, because I'm trying to relax and be cool right now," Abdullah tells alumni gathered at the Gateway Center dining hall for a breakfast meeting in mid-May, the day before commencement ceremonies. But he can't help it: "Usually around this time of the year, we have about 600 paid deposits for a class that ends up being about 1,000 students. Right now, we have about 1,300 paid deposits."

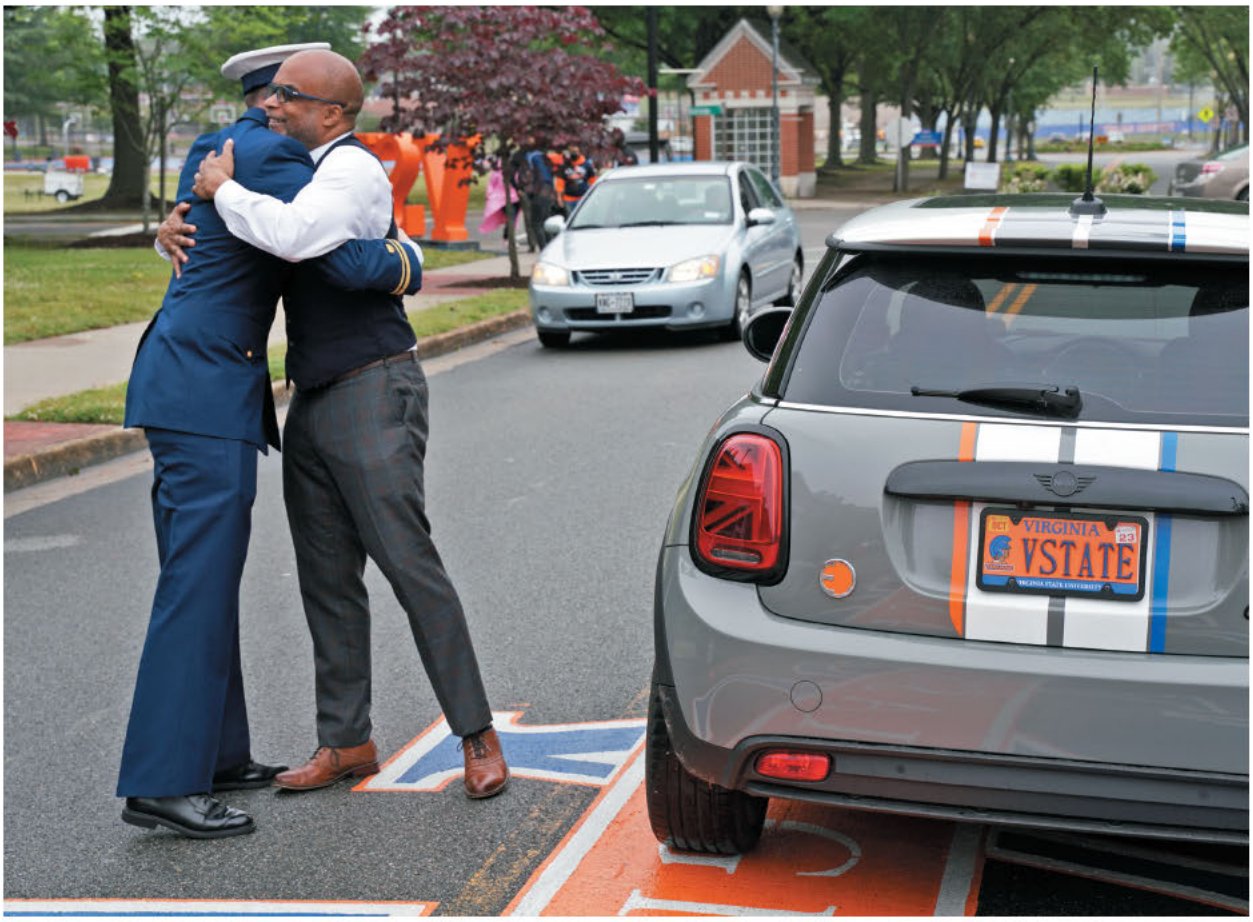
If "going viral" can take the form of a personality trait, it's on display at the breakfast meeting. Everyone smiles when Abdullah approaches, and several stop him and insist on hugs. Describing the improvements at Rogers Stadium — they are moving the stands closer, he jokes, "so when you yell at the [players], they can hear you" — the room lights up with laughter.

For much of the day, Abdullah scoots around campus in an electric Mini Cooper, detailed with blue, orange and white stripes, the school colors. He frequently stops in the middle of the street, jumping out to greet current and former students. The mood on campus is decidedly upbeat. As he parks to attend an ROTC ceremony, he flags two students walking down the sidewalk. He knows one of them and inquires about the student's graduation status.

"You walking?" Abdullah asks.

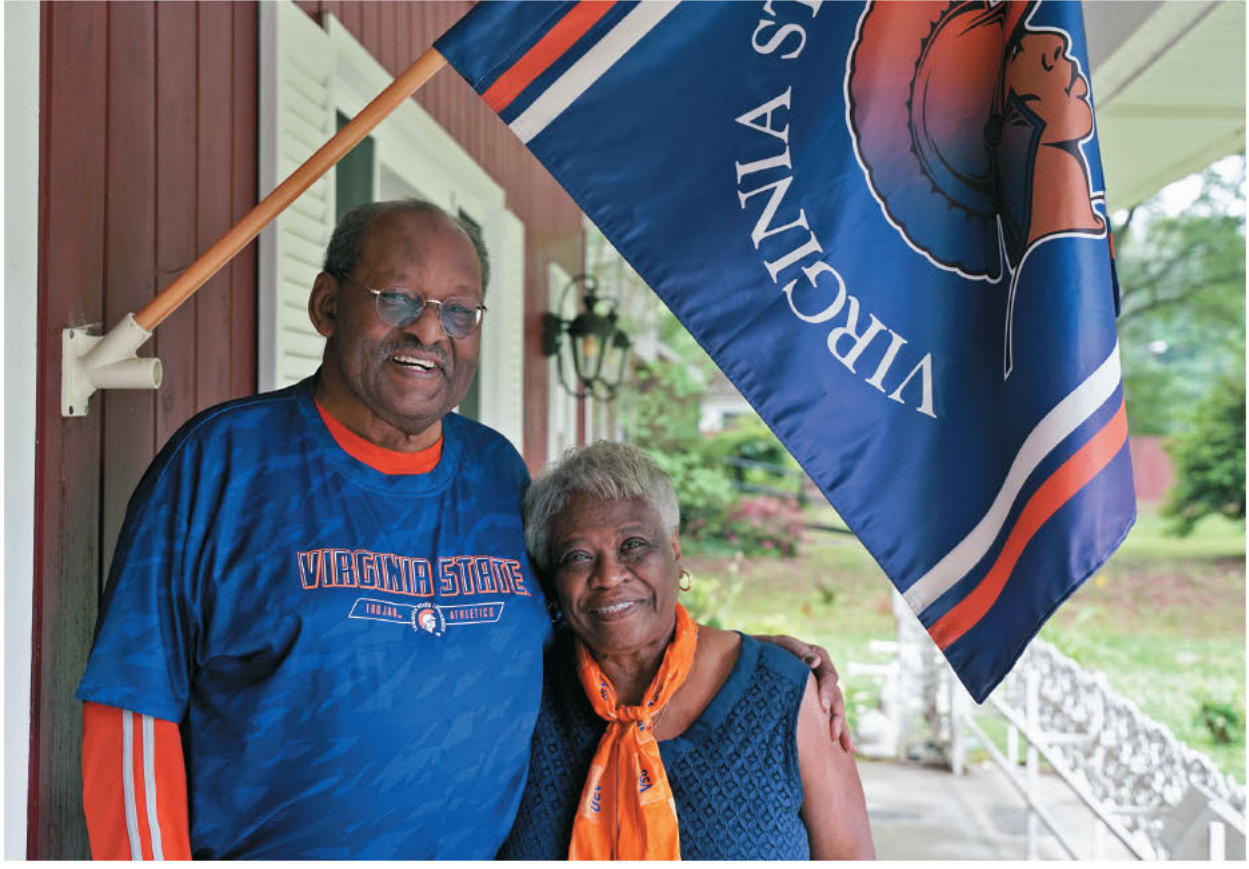
"I'm walking," says the student, who breaks into a wide smile, holding up his hands to signal that the president needn't worry.

Abdullah excels at relationship building. Almost everyone interviewed for this story concurs that he has an affective presence that helps generate buy-in from faculty, administrators and alumni to the overarching vision: to grow the university's academic profile and, with it, enrollment.



VSU president Makola Abdullah greets a former student on campus on May 13, the day before graduation ceremonies

JAY PAUL



Starrie and Deloris Jordan, who met at VSU in the 1960s, at home in Ettrick

"Someone once said some leaders spend their time trying to get others to look up to them, while leaders really should be trying to get others to think more highly of themselves," says Robert Corley, vice provost for academic and student affairs. "That's what you've seen over the past six years — capacity building, investment in the vision. You've also seen a whole different paradigm shift when it comes to students. You now have a president who is very engaged, who is down to earth, who is present — very present."

Abdullah's student-first approach extends beyond the easy banter and basketball videos. Sarah Melissa Witiak, a biology professor, says Abdullah has reoriented faculty back to helping and mentoring students, preaching the importance of retention. Many of VSU's students come from difficult backgrounds and low-income households, and they often need help beyond academics.

"I think that one of our strengths is that we really do care about our students," Witiak says. "And I think Abdullah has sort of made that culture change a little bit, that we are a place where we don't like to let people get lost."

How the university connects with the broader community, in Ettrick and beyond, is also part of the vision. After George Floyd was murdered by police in 2020, and the ensuing protests erupted across Central Virginia, Abdullah contacted Zoe Spencer, a sociology professor at VSU and activist who had experience working with Chesterfield Police a few years earlier. After witnessing an officer stop a Black teenager for no apparent reason, she contacted the department. The police chief invited her in, and she began teaching a workshop in "cultural actualization" to improve relations between officers and minorities. Abdullah wanted Spencer to start another dialogue.

"It was the heat of the moment. I didn't know if I was even ready to engage with law enforcement to come into a space that was otherwise hostile," says Spencer, who won a regional Emmy Award in 2020 for her spoken-word video, "Say Her Name," produced at VSU. Abdullah, however, persisted. "He said it's just very important for students and our community," she recalls.

Spencer bit. She contacted police chiefs and sheriffs across the region, and they began meeting with students and staff on campus. The idea, she says, is to simply "develop empathy around people who are different." In 2021, VSU made the program permanent, establishing the Center for Policing Leadership and Social Justice.

Growing up in Chicago, the importance of education was drilled into Abdullah by his parents, particularly his mother, who insisted that her son attend an HBCU after graduating from high school. At first he resisted, but he ultimately enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., going on to earn his master's and doctorate degrees in civil engineering from Northwestern University.

He spent two years in the private sector before shifting to teaching in 1996, spending a decade in the classroom. Abdullah got his first taste of administrative work in November 2005, when he was appointed associate vice

JAY PAUL

president for research at Florida A&M University.

"Higher administration was not at all anything I was interested in," he recalls. But the school's vice president of research asked him to step in, so he gave it shot. In the new role he quickly realized that he could have a "larger impact on students, and student opportunities."

Abdullah found his calling. He was promoted to dean at Florida A&M's College of Engineering Sciences, Technology and Agriculture in 2008. In March 2011, he became provost and vice president of academic affairs at Florida Memorial University, and then provost and senior vice president of academic affairs at Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Florida, in 2013.

Having spent his entire teaching and administrative career at HBCUs, he gained a clearer understanding of the critical role that Black colleges play in offering educational opportunities to students who often have few options.

"When I looked at the real strengths of Virginia State, I tried to figure out, 'Well, how do we capitalize on those strengths?' " he says, pointing out the school's affordability (with in-state tuition of just over $9,000, VSU is ranked the "most affordable" four-year college in Virginia by website University HQ). "But there was this larger thing happening, where there were many Virginians and many folks in this country who were really just locked out of higher education. ... What could we do to tear down those barriers?"

It's not so much a question as a mission, one that is deeply ingrained at Virginia State, dating back to its original charter in 1882. There was no college in the former Confederate states that provided African Americans with a liberal arts education before the Virginia General Assembly established the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute in the tiny village of Ettrick.

The all-Black college was born out of political opportunism, says Luscious Edwards, VSU's longtime historian. After the Civil War, the state's growing debt obligations had ballooned to $46 million, which had led to budget cuts and dwindling resources for public education. The debt led to the rise of a radical political movement, the Readjuster Party, which gained majorities in the General Assembly in 1879 and won the governor's office in 1881.

The Readjusters forged a broad, biracial coalition of working men and African Americans who struck a deal, Edwards says. Black voters would support the Readjusters in exchange for a new college. But there was a catch, and it was revolutionary at the time: Unlike most other Black colleges in Virginia and across the U.S., which taught African Americans industrial and agricultural trades in the years after slavery, the new university would include a liberal arts program. It would be coed, the entire faculty would be African American, along with most members of the Board of Visitors, the school's governing body.

"Black people knew what a college was and what you did with it. You needed people who could write books and lecture and do research and these kinds of things," Edwards says. "Black people needed more than teachers and people who could be blacksmiths."

That history of Black empowerment is embedded in the stories of alumni such as Starrie and Deloris Jordan, who met on campus in the 1960s. Starrie, from Hopewell, was the grandson of a sharecropper; Deloris grew up on one of the few Black-owned farms in Sussex County. They both graduated from Virginia State University — Starrie earned a degree in industrial arts, and Deloris became a teacher with an elementary special ed degree.

"We were in the heat of the whole Civil Rights movement," Deloris says. "My class was rambunctious, they really got into the marching and protesting, taking over the president's office." But it was also a nurturing environment: "We had good, caring professors who wanted us to succeed and did everything in their power to make sure that we got what we needed," she says.

She met Starrie while working at the lab elementary school on campus. They married in March 1966. Today, they live on Oakland Avenue in Ettrick, a few blocks from campus. Both are members of the alumni association, and they find themselves on campus at least once a week, often in the dining hall, talking and chatting with students.

They think highly of Abdullah, who is always willing to stop and talk. Starrie recalls that shortly after Abdullah took over, he and Deloris cornered him in the dining hall one Sunday afternoon and asked him to take care of the broken alumni fountain. Students had been putting detergent in the water feature to make bubbles, Starrie says, which mucked up the pumps. It had been out of commission for several months.

It was a small thing, but significant in what it represented. That continuum of history, the critical role VSU plays in bridging generations, building the Black middle class, nurturing and educating those searching for a way out.

In 2016, though, Abdullah didn't know about the fountain. "He said, 'Where is the fountain?' He had never seen it working, so he didn't know where it was," Deloris recalls. She and Starrie took him for a walk down University Avenue, to Foster Hall, where it sits out front. Within a month, Abdullah had the fountain up and running.

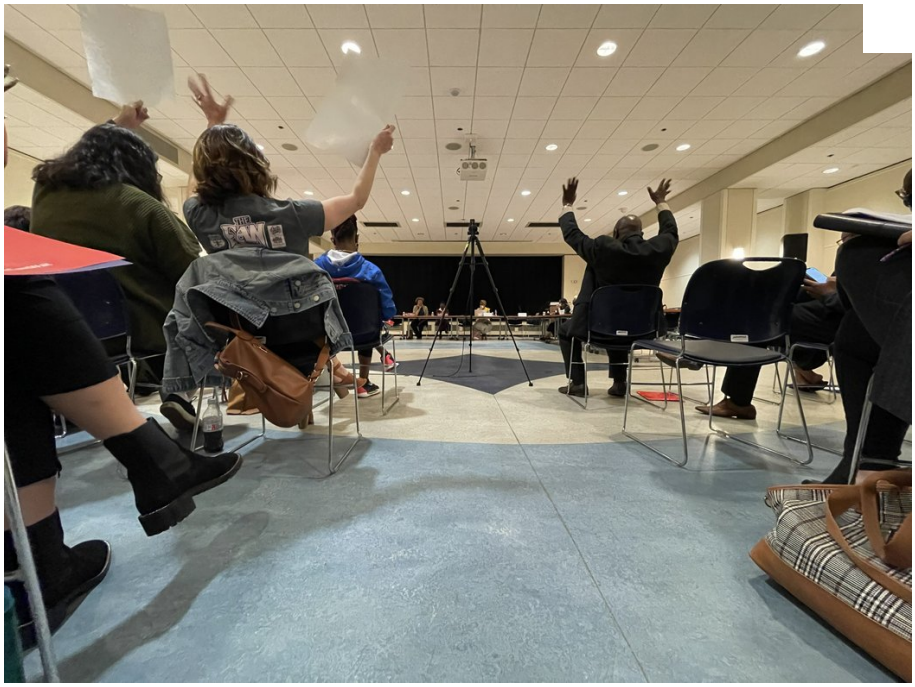
"It's been working ever since," she says.

Under Construction

The Richmond School Board is ready to start building its own schools. Is anyone else? | Photos by Scott Bass

BY SCOTT BASS MARCH 25, 2022

This article has been edited since it first appeared online.



Parents and advocates raise their hands in support as City Councilwoman Ellen Robertson speaks during a joint meeting between City Council and the Richmond School Board on Tuesday.

The return to the classroom was joyous for students at William Fox Elementary. After five weeks in virtual limbo thanks to a three-alarm fire that ravaged their school on Feb. 11, students returned last week to makeshift classrooms at First Baptist Church on Monument Avenue. The move, which wasn't expected until after spring break, represents a small but important victory for a school system that seems to be

in constant upheaval of late. Superintendent Jason Kamras and Fox Principal Daniela
Jacobs greeted students at the door with hugs and smiles.

Those warm fuzzies, however, didn't last long.

At a work session March 21, the board picked up right where it left off in late February — failing to resolve a still-unfinished budget it has yet to submit to City Council and Mayor Levar Stoney, who set a deadline of Feb. 25. At the same meeting, the board decided in closed session to block Kamras from hiring a key administrator, citing budget constraints, deepening a growing rift with the superintendent. And then on March 22, after months of political wrangling with Stoney and City Council over building plans for a new George Wythe High School, both governing bodies met in hopes of resolving the impasse. It didn't go well.

After a contentious two hours of back and forth in the basement auditorium of Richmond's Central Library, Councilwoman Ann-Frances Lambert and School Board member Cheryl Burke walked out. A second School Board member, Vice Chair Kenya Gibson, also left roughly an hour into the meeting. It was a remarkable public airing of grievances. In addition to disagreement among the two elected bodies, the most aggressive exchanges took place among the School Board members themselves. The meeting came to a head when School Board member Nicole Jones addressed the "elephant" in the room: the disunity on the board.

"We are not aligned. … If we were talking as a board, we wouldn't be sitting here," said Jones, who is part of the board's minority, which includes members Cheryl

Burke, Elizabeth Doerr and Dawn Page. “I am very frustrated right now because we sat here, and we are still walking out without a resolve. I’m sorry, but it’s just, like, ‘Enough is enough.’ ”

Stephanie Rizzi, a member of the School Board’s majority bloc, which includes Gibson, Chairman Shondra Harris-Muhammed, Jonathan Young and Mariah White, concurred that the board needs to have more internal discussions, but things quickly derailed as she spoke. She stopped and glared at an audience member who she said was disrupting her train of thought.

“Can we get this person in the audience quiet? I cannot concentrate,” Rizzi snapped. Council President Cynthia Newbille responded, “I’m not hearing anyone.” (The woman, RPS teacher and parent Lakeisha Williams, was, at worst, grumbling disapprovingly.) Newbille tried to restore some semblance of order, but it was too late. Burke and Lambert got up from their seats and left shortly after the exchange. “Are you guys getting up while I am talking?” Rizzi chided. “Wow. Now we get to see.”

The ruckus helped obscure an otherwise important debate over the future of city schools. The overarching issue is one of democratic prerogative — Which elected body should drive the process of school construction? — and how best to use seemingly limited public resources. First and foremost, the joint meeting was called to resolve a straightforward question: Should the new George Wythe High School be built with a capacity for 2,000 students, or 1,600?

The School Board’s majority is pushing for a smaller school, citing available capacity across the district to

absorb students if enrollment continues to surge on the city's South Side. Coupled with plans for a new career and technical center not far from Wythe, Young offered that building a new high school with a capacity for 2,000 students is unnecessary. Building a smaller school was more prudent, he said, and would free up money to devote to other school building projects. And there's plenty of capacity at other high schools if enrollment at Wythe exceeds expectations.

"We have 2,500 vacant seats right now in our high school buildings across town," said Young, who suggested that redistricting would solve any potential overcrowding. "That's nearly the entire enrollment at George Wythe and Huguenot put together."

Council and the mayor, citing census data and current overcrowding issues, see more growth necessitating a larger school. A demographics consultant hired by the School Board in 2019, Cropper GIS, projected Wythe would reach 1,779 students by 2029 (its current capacity is 1,401). And those numbers might be too conservative. Cropper's estimates were provided prior to the 2020 U.S. Census, which shows an even faster rate of population growth throughout the city. What's more, Wythe is one of the few Richmond schools with a majority Hispanic population, a demographic group that's historically undercounted in the census data.

Young countered that the consultant's projections have already proven inaccurate, considering that enrollment at Wythe this year is just under 1,300 students (Cropper projected enrollment at Wythe would reach 1,541 students in 2021). His detractors point out that Cropper's analysis predates the pandemic, which has

led to enrollment decreases citywide, a short-term trend that isn't expected to continue.

There is enough existing capacity across the district's 41 schools to accommodate the overall student population of 21,179, but utilizing that capacity would require redistricting, something RPS has only done piecemeal. There's been no discussion of engaging in a citywide redistricting process, which comes with its own set of political obstacles.

Ellen Robertson, vice president of City Council, proposes a compromise during Tuesday's meeting with the School Board: Build a new George Wythe High School with a capacity of 1,800. Council is expected to vote on whether to transfer $7.3 million to the school system to begin design work on the new school on Monday night.

The overarching point, Gibson said, is that these are decisions to be made by the School Board, which is legally responsible for school construction decisions. Council's role, she said, is to simply transfer the funds.

“Ultimately, this is quite simple. All that we need at this point to begin is for Council to transfer funds that have been already allocated to school construction to another account that is allocated for school construction,” Gibson said of the $7.3 million that City Council has delayed allocating to begin the design process for a new Wythe. “City Council has no legal authority to determine the size of the school or other matters. So, forcing the board to jump through hoops and answer question after question after question … it’s not been cooperative by any measure. And it’s worth noting that the same people that elected you all to address policing in our city, to ensure that the roads are paved, to make sure that they have homes over their head — those same people elected this body to govern over schools.”

Council has the ultimate responsibility of allocating taxpayer funds to the school system. In Virginia, school boards have legal oversight over school operations, but no taxing authority. In Richmond, where resources are limited, the construction piece had long been delegated to City Hall, which gave it a greater voice in decision-making. That all changed in April 2021 when the School Board decided to bring design, procurement and construction of schools in-house. Plans for a new Wythe — the mayor’s administration had already issued a request for proposals (RFP) — got caught in the crosshairs.

“George Wythe would be under construction right now if schools hadn’t taken back construction. Look, the mayor had his RFP out already,” Councilwoman Katherine Jordan said at the joint meeting on Tuesday. She pointed out that the city already has the

construction and procurement expertise while the school system is still developing theirs.

“We have a full construction team, that’s just a fact,” she said, turning to Rizzi. “You spoke to the fact that there’s not enough resources in George Wythe. That’s heartbreaking. And when we build a new, larger one, where are we going to come up with those resources? I would rather have the School Board apply their funds to those needs and let the city use our existing construction to [build a new Wythe].”

Rich Meagher, a political science professor at Randolph-Macon College, says the School Board’s fight over Wythe is akin to “taking a stand on democratic accountability,” which is certainly valid. The responsibility for schools, including construction, is important. But this current board hasn’t given the public much reason to trust them, he says.

For example, the School Board’s majority attempted to ax its superintendent’s chief operating officer and a vacant wellness officer position even as it takes on more administrative duties — like managing the construction of new schools — and help students recover, academically and emotionally, from the pandemic. It’s also now a month late sending the mayor and City Council it’s budget request for fiscal year 2023.

The School Board also has a knack for contradiction. At one point during its work session last week, two board members began questioning the need for a district-wide facilities assessment to evaluate “the overall condition of each RPS school.” This was an assessment the board asked Kamras to solicit bids for a year ago as it began the herculean task of managing school

construction. “I’m not convinced that we don’t already know what we need to be doing,” Gibson said, questioning the assessment’s price tag. “I can walk around this building and tell you what the problem is. We don’t need to spend $500,000.”

At times, Meagher says, the School Board seems lost in the forest.

“The School Board has not provided a lot of evidence to be trusted. They don’t have a good institutional memory or history, or even a clear understanding of what their role is,” says Meagher, who lives in Richmond. “There’s not exactly a coherent agenda.”

On Monday night, City Council rejected an ordinance to release to RPS the $7.3 million to begin design work on a new George Wythe, citing the same concerns about the new school's capacity. But it will likely be back on the agenda in the next few weeks. Regardless of what happens, Harris-Muhammed insists the disagreements and infighting won’t get in the way of the School Board doing its job.

“Yes, it is evident that there are board members who disagree,” she said in an interview on March 23. “But I don’t think the disagreements … will hinder us going forward.”