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The Power of the Liberal Arts

The following remarks were delivered by Dr. William C. Dudley, President of Washington and Lee University, at the VFIC Harris Family Faculty Awards luncheon on November 5, 2025. Addressing the enduring question “Why Liberal Arts?,” President Dudley reflects on the meaning, value, and power of a liberal arts education.

“Thank you for the invitation to offer remarks on an important topic—“Why Liberal Arts?”—on this important occasion, the Harris Family Faculty Awards luncheon. I would like to thank Hiter Harris and his family for recognizing faculty “whose professional history reflects a strong, clear, and abiding commitment to excellence in classroom teaching within the undergraduate liberal arts and sciences.

The Harris family’s celebration of excellent liberal arts education warms the heart of a philosopher who also majored in math. But it is also out of fashion. There is widespread and persistent skepticism about the value of this sort of education. People frequently ask: “Are the liberal arts still relevant in the 21st century?” “What is the return on investment?”

In the midst of public hand wringing about the relevance of what we do, we should channel our inner Socrates, who would counsel us to remain calm and pose a more fundamental question. We should insist that our critics

join us in considering: “What are the liberal arts?” I like to clarify their meaning by analogy. Consider the martial arts. The “martial arts,” literally, are the disciplines that prepare you for war. Although they are ancient, they have never been more popular.

If the martial arts are the disciplines that prepare you for war, the liberal arts are the disciplines that set you free. The main impediments to freedom are ignorance and alienation. Freedom means not being governed by things we don’t understand, by societies in which we are not recognized, by political institutions that do not represent us. Liberal arts education increases our knowledge of ourselves, of the natural world, and of the legal, economic, moral, political, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life. The “arts” in “liberal arts” does not mean “arts.” Or “humanities.” It means “disciplines,” which include the arts and humanities, but also (since ancient times) math and science, and by extension any discipline that puts us in a position to be more fully self-determining, by giving us tools to understand the world in which we live and to work more effectively to build communities in which every person has the same rights, responsibilities, and respect.

Are the liberal arts relevant? So long as there is a need for freedom, there will be a need for liberal arts education. Freedom is a noble ideal, but liberal arts education is expensive. So how could it be a good value? The answer

Cover story, cont.

lies in the fact that although liberal arts education is the antithesis of job training, it also happens to be the best form of professional preparation. It expands our horizons, develops our capacities, and increases our flexibility. Nothing could be more valuable than that in the 21st century. The liberal arts are not soft and weak but, like the martial arts, devastatingly powerful.

The graduates of our venerable VFIC schools—I like to think of them as black belts of freedom—are living proof that the pursuit of one's intellectual interests for their own sake is an exceptional foundation for accomplishment in any arena, including those with no direct connection to a particular field of study, and for making valuable contributions to society.

“The problem is not that liberal arts education is insufficiently valuable. The problem is that the highest quality liberal arts education is so valuable there’s a moral, social, and political imperative to make it more widely available and affordable.”

This is a challenge of scale that no single institution can solve, but to which each of our institutions makes an important contribution. And for which the VFIC is a strong advocate.

How, exactly, do we go about providing an outstanding liberal arts education? As the students in my philosophy seminar know, I like to think of a small college or university as an incubator. We are not raising chickens. But we are helping young people raise themselves. We are helping them cultivate their potential.

Each year at Washington and Lee we welcome 475 eighteen-year-olds and 120 first-year law students to our community. We place them in an environment carefully constructed to be conducive to their flourishing. It is small,

rural, residential, and resource intensive. It is populated by capable and dedicated peers, professors, coaches, and staff. It is busy. The variety and intensity of curricular and extra-curricular activity is astonishing. The incubator never sleeps.

At the end of the year, we celebrate commencement by ejecting 500 newly minted graduates from the nest. How are they different, we must always ask ourselves, as a result of the years they have spent in our incubator? We know they are older. Our success rate is 100% on that score. But are they wiser—do they have a clearer understanding of the goals it is important to pursue? Are they well-prepared—do they have the knowledge and the skills they will need to achieve their important goals? Are they better people—do they have the character and habits to persevere and succeed when doing the right thing is hard? Are they happier—do they feel confident about the future and satisfied with the paths they are on?

No standardized test can answer these questions. The proof lies in the lives led by our alumni. The men and women who return to our campuses more than 50 years after their graduation embody the lifelong impact of our educational incubators. These alumni have achieved a great deal in every professional arena, they have contributed countless hours and funds to worthy causes, and they have distinguished themselves as public servants in their communities. I am exceptionally proud of our graduates. And the young people on our campuses today will—in virtue of the liberal arts education we provide—make us equally proud for decades to come.

Liberal arts education has never been more important. Liberal arts education has never been more valuable. The work we do every day is both a great joy and a great responsibility. Our students fill me with optimism. We are lucky to know them. And they are lucky to be taught by faculty like those being honored today, who are devoted to helping their students discover their purposes and fulfill their potential. It is a noble enterprise, and the great Commonwealth of Virginia is fortunate to have so many private colleges and universities dedicated to it. Thank you to the VFIC and its many donors for your steadfast contributions to our efforts on behalf of the young people who will be the leaders of the future.”

Welcome New VFIC Trustees & College Presidents



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Maria Tedesco
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Douglas Wilson
Executive Vice President
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Why Invest in the VFIC?

Supporting the Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges (VFIC) is more than philanthropy—it's an investment in Virginia's future. Your contributions fund scholarships that create opportunities for talented students at 17 member schools, generating a ripple effect across the Commonwealth.

Building a Pipeline of Talent

- VFIC schools align programs with market needs—nursing, engineering, cybersecurity—while preserving the strengths of a liberal arts education.
- Graduates are critical thinkers, effective communicators, and adaptable professionals.
- Over 70 percent of VFIC alumni stay in Virginia, strengthening the workforce and economy.

Impact Made Simple

- One gift reaches 17 schools and more than 35,000 students.
- 100 percent of donations go directly to student aid.
- Your generosity empowers students to choose the school that best fits their aspirations.

Transforming Lives

- More than 40 percent of VFIC students are Pell-eligible, ensuring access for underrepresented and first-generation students.
- Scholarships change lives—impacting families and communities for generations.
- Experience the joy of success stories from scholarship and “Home Stretch” recipients.



Invest in the VFIC today—because when students succeed, Virginia thrives.

www.vfic.org/donate



For Pierce Faulcon, Opportunity Knocked

Pierce Faulcon didn't find Roanoke College. It found him.

“I was playing in my final high school volleyball game, and Matt Reinsel, the coach just hired to lead Roanoke College’s first-ever volleyball team, was there to recruit a player across the net from me,” said Pierce. “After the game, Coach Reinsel introduced himself to me and asked if I’d be interested in playing collegiate volleyball.”

While Pierce fully expected to attend a public university in Virginia, he always felt inspired by the thought that he might attend a smaller, independent school.

“I knew that I’d thrive in a small-school environment,” said Pierce, “so I toured the beautiful campus one November day and decided on the spot that I wanted to attend Roanoke College.”

Pierce entered Roanoke College as an engineering major. Shortly after arriving, however, he changed his major to math. When he did, Roanoke College’s highly personalized support system and learning culture became quickly apparent.

“My professors were very supportive and helpful—that’s just the way things are here. Faculty and staff want to see students succeed. They’re always accessible. Their door is always open.”

Over the past four years, he’s had the opportunity to do an internship with the real estate assessment office of the finance division for Henrico County, Virginia. That’s just one of many experiential learning opportunities he has enjoyed.

“Every student at Roanoke College completes a May term,” says Pierce. “While some travel abroad, I actually took advantage of the opportunity to participate in a leadership course at Disney World in Orlando. There, we witnessed firsthand how Disney managers applied leadership principles to their daily operation.”

Pierce is seeking to become a data analyst when he graduates in spring 2026, and he would like to devote himself to a field that allows him to apply his knowledge of numbers and his interest in economics. But between now and graduation, it’s volleyball season.

“We finished last season second in the conference with more than twenty wins,” says Pierce. “That’s a huge jump over winning just seven games our freshman year.” Every season has been better than the one before it.

“I’ve had so many amazing opportunities over the past four years,” says Pierce. “The athletics have been exhilarating. The academics have been rigorous. I’ve cultivated so many great personal relationships. And I’ve been inspired by an array of learning opportunities. It’s amazing! And to think it all began with a chance meeting on a volleyball court in 2022.”



Photo: Keith Vander Vennet, courtesy of Ferguson

A Win-Win Partnership

Ferguson Enterprises, Inc. and the VFIC

“Ferguson’s relationship with the VFIC goes back to 1968, making it one of our oldest community partnerships,” says Keith Vander Vennet, Senior Vice President-Field of Ferguson and longstanding board member of the VFIC. “We’re proud to support the VFIC through scholarships and leadership engagement. Our contributions to the General Scholarship Program go directly to students with financial need across all 17 member institutions.”

Clearly, that’s a win for VFIC schools and the students who attend them. The benefit to Ferguson? “With more than 35,000 associates, Ferguson depends on a wide range of talent to keep our business running,” says Vander Vennet.

“Supporting VFIC schools strengthens Virginia’s talent pipeline and helps us broaden our own talent pool for many different roles across the organization.”

That’s a big win for us.”

What does that talent look like? Ferguson looks for associates who are adaptable, collaborative, and eager to learn. According to Vander Vennet, students who succeed in the Ferguson business model are those who can thrive in fast-paced environments, solve problems, and communicate effectively. Technical expertise is important, but digital skills are increasingly critical as AI, e-commerce, and data analytics play a larger role in the industry. Ferguson values curiosity and a growth mindset.

“VFIC schools help us,’ says Vander Vennet, “by blending strong academics with practical, real-world experience. Expanding internships and employer partnerships gives students hands-on exposure to the business environment. Incorporating digital skills—data analytics, AI and emerging technologies—into coursework prepares graduates for the evolving landscape. And offering opportunities to develop problem-solving and communication skills ensures students are ready to contribute from day one.”

Ferguson is committed to helping students succeed, and the partnership with the VFIC is a big part of that commitment. Each year, the company provides scholarships and works closely with VFIC leadership because it knows that financial support and guidance make a real difference.

“As a graduate of Hampden-Sydney College, I personally support VFIC schools and the students who attend them,” says Vander Vennet. “In addition, my wife, Greta, and I are members of the Heritage Society because we’ve made a planned gift to the foundation.”

This special partnership also strengthens Ferguson’s ties to communities across Virginia and reinforces the company’s commitment to creating vibrant local economies. Over the years, Ferguson has supported schools like Hampden-Sydney College by helping build its Career Center—a resource that continues to prepare students for life after graduation.

“Our student-first approach reflects how Ferguson Cares invests—helping students graduate and preparing them for meaningful careers. We know that success looks different for everyone, whether that’s college, the trades or technical training. Our goal is to help students find the path that works for them.”

Ethics and Business: VFIC's 26th Annual Applied Ethics Bowl

Student teams from VFIC schools to engage in spirited dialogue and networking as they explore the ethical challenges shaping today's business world.

The Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges will host the 26th Annual Applied Ethics Bowl, presented by TowneBank, on February 13, 2026, at the University of Richmond. This signature event brings together student teams from VFIC institutions to engage in dialogue around this year's theme: "Ethics and Business."

"The Applied Ethics Bowl challenges students to think critically about the moral dimensions of commerce and leadership," says VFIC President Locke Ogens. "It's an opportunity for future leaders to demonstrate integrity and discernment in addressing complex questions."

The one-day program features a series of 45-minute rounds in the morning and afternoon, where teams present arguments and exchange perspectives with peers. The day concludes with a championship round



and reception at the Jepson Alumni Center, where the winning team will claim the coveted Batten Trophy.

To strengthen the connection between academic inquiry and professional success, the event includes a networking lunch. Students will join VFIC trustees and business leaders for conversations about career paths in fields such as law, healthcare, and finance. Participants are encouraged to bring resumes and make valuable connections with corporate representatives.

"Our mission is to prepare students not only for careers but for lives of purpose," Ogens adds. "The Applied Ethics Bowl equips them to navigate the moral complexities that shape decisions in business, government, and society."

Celebrating Excellence in Teaching: The 2025 Harris Family Faculty Awards

At the VFIC's annual fall luncheon on November 5, 2025, held at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture in Richmond, six outstanding faculty members were recognized for their commitment to student success and dedication to higher education. Each recipient received a stipend to advance their scholarly research and professional development. Endowed through the generosity of the H. Hiter Harris family, these awards shine a spotlight on the distinctive strengths of VFIC colleges and universities by recognizing educators whose careers exemplify a deep and enduring dedication to excellence in undergraduate liberal arts and sciences teaching.



Harris Rising Star Award

Scott Starr, Ph.D.

Hansen Assistant Professor of Biology
Hampden-Sydney College

Eric M. Trinka, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Religious Studies
Emory & Henry University



Harris Award for Excellence in Instructional Technology

Jacob Euteneuer, Ph.D.

Elliott Assistant Professor of Rhetoric
Hampden-Sydney College

M. Saif Mehkari, Ph.D.

Professor of Economics
University of Richmond



Bartolo Natoli, Ph.D.

Professor of Classics
Randolph-Macon College



Harris Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching

Helena von Rueden, Ph.D.

Elliott Associate Professor of Fine Arts
Hampden-Sydney College



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vfic.org



Mission

To secure financial support that enables college-bound students to access and graduate from outstanding Virginia independent higher education institutions.

Vision

Academically qualified college-bound students will access personalized, values-based higher education at VFIC colleges and universities, regardless of their financial situation.



VFIC Annual Fund

The VFIC seeks to ensure that the personalized educational experience of independent colleges in Virginia remains an affordable choice for tomorrow's citizen leaders. Without VFIC funds, the available pool of financial aid would shrink, and many of our more than 35,000 students would not be able to attend the VFIC college of their choice. If you have already given to the 2025–2026 Annual Fund, thank you. If not, please consider joining the Honor Roll of Donors. Your support provides the resources students need to achieve their goals and lead lives of service and distinction.

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