

Virginia Commonwealth University

Report to the Southern Association of Colleges  
and Schools

September 5, 2008

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## I. Purpose

This report from Virginia Commonwealth University to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools details the University's response to allegations that it improperly awarded an undergraduate degree to an influential party in May of 2007.

## II. Summary of Major Findings and Actions Taken

- A. Virginia Commonwealth University meets all SACS requirements for policies and procedures related to the earning of its degrees.
- B. Virginia Commonwealth University has found no systemic failures in its application of these policies and procedures. Rather, a small number of individuals intentionally violated approved policies and procedures or improperly influenced others to do so. Some of these individuals have left the University and/or resigned administrative positions, and one individual was provided with a letter of counsel and caution.
- C. Investigation of over 15,000 degrees awarded from January 2003 through May 2008, shows that only two were awarded to students who did not complete at least 30 credit hours in residence at VCU without having an approved exception. One of those degrees substantially met the residency requirement, and was awarded posthumously. The second was awarded to the student identified in the allegation.
- D. The degree was allowed to stand as awarded, because VCU's current policy does not permit its revocation.
- E. The University is further strengthening its policies, procedures, and controls for the awarding of degrees. Any resultant changes will meet all applicable SACS requirements.
- F. VCU is actively reaffirming its Code of Conduct, its Code of Ethics, and statements of values.
- G. Virginia Commonwealth University is confident that this was an isolated incident, and that its degrees meet all SACS expectations.

## III. Background

On the morning of May 15, 2008, an anonymous source forwarded to the wife of Virginia Commonwealth University's Board of Visitors' Rector, Mr. Thomas Rosenthal, an electronic message including an extensive

document as an attachment. These communications alleged that a Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies (BIS) degree conferred on a student in May of 2007 had been awarded in violation of the University's academic/ residency requirements, and that this degree was awarded as a result of influence by the dean of the University's College of Humanities and Sciences (Dr. Robert Holsworth) and the Mayor of the City of Richmond (Mr. L. Douglas Wilder, also a member of the University's faculty). The message further alleged that the dean of the University's first-year college (Dr. S. Jon Steingass, Dean of University College) invoked the name and authority of VCU's President (Dr. Eugene P. Trani) in an attempt to persuade the coordinator of the BIS program to authorize the awarding of the degree.

The student in question was alleged to be politically influential, and the anonymous communications likened the situation at Virginia Commonwealth University to that which recently had been disclosed at West Virginia University. Finally, the e-mail suggested that the same communications were being delivered to officials at the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools as well as the news media, and it appears that this did in fact occur. (Although the University assiduously has attempted to protect the student's identity in recognition of its responsibilities under FERPA, the student was at some point identified to the press as Mr. Rodney Monroe, then the Police Chief for the City of Richmond.)

The Rector retrieved the anonymous message on the evening of May 18, 2008, and forwarded it to Mr. Richard Bunce, Executive Director of the University's Department of Assurance Services (which historically has investigated instances of alleged wrongdoing within the University) that same day. On May 19<sup>th</sup>, Assurance Services conducted a preliminary review and determined that further investigation of the allegations was warranted.

At approximately 9:30 a.m. on May 20<sup>th</sup>, Mr. Bunce informed the University's Provost, Dr. Stephen Gottfredson, of the allegations. The Provost immediately summoned the deans identified in the anonymous allegation and discussed the allegations with them. Their responses suggested that a deeper review was necessary.

That same morning, Mr. Bunce forwarded the anonymous e-mail to the University President, Dr. Eugene P. Trani, at his request. Early on May 21<sup>st</sup>, the Provost telephoned Dr. Wheelan, President of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Dr. Wheelan reported that she had not in fact received the e-mail message but that she had received an anonymous telephone call concerning an "unnamed" Virginia university and an inappropriately awarded degree. Dr. Gottfredson assured

President Wheelan that the University took the matter seriously, would conduct a thorough investigation and review, and would report its findings and actions to SACS.

On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Executive Committee of the University's Board of Visitors assigned responsibility for investigating the allegations to Mr. Bunce, required that he report solely to the Board of Visitors during the conduct of this review, and assigned investigation oversight responsibility to the Academic and Health Affairs Policy Committee of the Board.

#### IV. Review Procedures, Findings and Conclusions

The review conducted by the Department of Assurance Services included, but was not limited to:

- Obtaining and evaluating BIS student files for all who graduated from the program since August of 2006;
- Researching the University's admission policies, procedures and requirements as stated in the applicable Undergraduate Student Bulletin;
- Conducting research on the BIS program's admissions, academic, and graduation requirements;
- Conducting research on the degree conferral requirements of the university and of SACS;
- Conducting 38 interviews of 24 individuals between May 20<sup>th</sup> and June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008 ;
- Reviewing the e-mail accounts of 13 employees and of the former student;
- Obtaining and analyzing reports from the University's student systems and related databases, including those concerning transfer credits, academic course work, and degrees conferred, and;
- Analyzing information retained by the University's Academic Regulations Appeals Committee (ARAC).

Because of the nature and seriousness of the allegations, an outside consultant (Deloitte and Touche) was retained to review the Department of Assurance Services' work plan, procedures and conclusions for reasonableness and completeness.

On June 26<sup>th</sup>, the Academic and Health Affairs Policy Committee of the Board of Visitors met in closed session to receive the report of the

Department of Assurance Services. President Trani and Provost Gottfredson were present at this meeting.

The essential findings reported to the Committee were as follows:

- The Department observed many discrepancies in the information provided during the course of the interviews, both among the various individuals who were interviewed and even from the same individuals who were interviewed on more than one occasion;
- Of the 28 academic requirements of the BIS program that normally should be satisfied prior to the awarding of that degree, the affected student's academic record appeared to satisfy only 15;
- Some 37 exceptions to routine processing and documentation requirements were noted. These exceptions occurred at every major juncture in this student's VCU experience: University admissions, admission to the BIS program, academic courses, and graduation;
- Comparison of this student's academic file with those maintained for other BIS students who graduated from the program since August 2006 showed it to be the only one that did not evidence interaction between the student and BIS officials, and the only one missing critical elements indicating satisfaction of normal curriculum requirements;
- The types and percentage of transfer credits accepted for this student were unusual in comparison with other University students. VCU accepted 118 hours of transfer credits, and applied these credits to the degree awarded by VCU;
- This student completed only six undergraduate credits at VCU and no application for an exception to the "25% rule" (the requirement that at least 25% of the credit hours required for the bachelor's degree program be completed at VCU, including at least 30 of the last 45 credit hours) was submitted to or approved by the University's Academic Regulations Appeal Committee (ARAC); and that
- For the period January 2003 through May 2008, over 15,000 undergraduate degrees were awarded by VCU and were examined as part of this investigation. Only two bachelor's degrees were awarded to students who did not complete at least 30 credit hours in residence at VCU without having an approved exception by ARAC. One of those degrees substantially met the requirement, and was awarded posthumously. The second was awarded to the student identified in the allegation.

Based on this review and these findings, Assurance Services concluded that the academic credentials supporting the degree awarded to the student named in the allegation failed to meet University requirements in several respects, one of which was the failure to obtain 30 credit hours in residence at VCU, a requirement of the University and a guideline of SACS. Further, and as noted above, no exception to that requirement was requested of or approved by the University committee charged with addressing such issues (ARAC).

It further was observed that the nature, number, and magnitude of the exceptions to approved practice could not have occurred unless this student had been afforded preferential treatment at the admissions, curriculum, and graduation stages of the student experience. Moreover, for this student to have been awarded the BIS degree from VCU, it was necessary for more than one employee to overlook or disregard institutional policies and procedures that were known, or should have been known, by the responsible faculty and staff.

It was reported that Assurance Services did not receive necessary cooperation from all individuals during the course of the review and that due to the conflicting statements of those interviewed, the stated inability of several interviewees to recall key events in this student's experience, the changing and conflicting statements provided by some individuals, and the failure to maintain critical records, it was not possible to determine with certitude whether the preferential treatment the student received resulted from actual influence exerted or from influence perceived by those faculty and staff responsible for critical activities.

Finally, Assurance Service's report noted that, from a review of the official academic records maintained by the University Registrar, since January 2003, only two undergraduate degrees have been conferred on students who did not complete at least 30 credit hours in residence at VCU without an approved exception. One of these degrees was awarded posthumously to a student who substantially met the requirement; the second was awarded to the student identified in the anonymous complaint, who completed only six undergraduate credit hours at VCU. During that same period, VCU conferred over 15,000 undergraduate degrees. Based on these statistics and on other analyses performed, it was concluded that VCU's relevant processes and procedures have been effective in enforcing the residency requirement save only this particular instance.

The consensus of the Board of Visitors' oversight committee was that Assurance Services' review was thorough and complete, and the findings and conclusions reached were appropriate. That being the case, the

report was forwarded to the full Board of Visitors during a closed session meeting the following day, June 27<sup>th</sup>.

#### V. Action by the Board of Visitors

The Rector of the Board of Visitors asked the Academic and Health Affairs Policy Committee of the Board to provide recommendations to the full Board concerning:

- The degree awarded to the named student in 2007;
- How to deal with those who directly or indirectly facilitated the awarding of this degree; and
- Internal changes required to reduce the risk that this situation could occur again.

##### A. The Degree

Noting that it was clear from the investigation that the degree in question almost certainly would not have been granted had established procedures been followed, the Committee recognized that a key question became what action, if any, should be taken with respect to that degree. Three options were considered: a) revocation, b) allowing the degree to stand as awarded, or c) some intermediate action such as requiring additional course work or applying graduate credits earned to the undergraduate BIS degree.

As described in the VCU Undergraduate Bulletin, the only identified circumstance in which the University could act to revoke a degree is for academic misconduct that occurred prior to the awarding of the degree. The Committee noted that the investigation found no evidence that the student had any role in requesting an exception to the residency requirement, was even aware that the residency requirement existed, or was aware that an exception had been granted. It also noted that the student had cooperated fully with the investigation.

The Committee considered intermediate options at length, including whether graduate credits earned by the student could or should be applied to the undergraduate record after the awarding of the undergraduate degree, but noted that this still would not fully meet the University's residency requirement. The Committee also considered offering the student the opportunity to earn additional undergraduate hours which, if combined with already-earned graduate hours, would meet the residency requirement. The Committee recognized that either of these options effectively would require the student's approval, and

effectively would vacate a degree already awarded, which, in the final analysis, was not viewed as a viable option.

Based on the above, and absent any evidence of culpability on the part of the student, the Committee ultimately recommended that revocation of the degree awarded to this student would not be appropriate.

Accordingly, and with the concurrence of the President and Provost, the Committee recommended that the Board take no action to revoke, alter or change the degree awarded in the spring of 2007. The full Board of Visitors accepted this recommendation by consensus.

#### B. Individuals Deemed Responsible

The Committee and the Board were disappointed that the Department of Assurance Services encountered considerable difficulties in the course of its investigation, including conflicting statements, failing memories, unwillingness to explain situations, and unexplained loss of relevant documents and records. This investigation found that a small number of employees acted affirmatively to facilitate the award of a VCU degree improperly. Further, the Committee noted that while a number of individuals had the opportunity to prevent this situation from occurring, none acted to prevent the degree from being issued without meeting all of the University's requirements, and specifically its residency requirement.

Accordingly, the Committee and the Board recommended that the administration take strong, decisive and appropriate action with respect to individuals who acted inappropriately in connection with this matter and to report such actions to the Board.

The Board approved these recommendations by consensus.

#### C. Internal Changes

The Committee noted that overall, VCU's processes and procedures work very well. Considering that during the past five years over 15,000 undergraduate degrees have been awarded with only two unapproved exceptions to the University's residency requirement, one of which was awarded posthumously, the Committee felt that VCU's record in that regard could be seen to represent "best practice." Despite this, the University experienced a breakdown which allowed a student to receive a degree without meeting all requirements that thousands of other students have been required to meet.

Accordingly, the Committee recommended that the Office of the Provost review the results and findings of the investigation and make process

and control changes as required to further reduce the likelihood of this situation recurring. In so doing, particular focus was to be given to preventing management override of critical processes which protect the integrity of the degrees which are awarded.

This recommendation was approved by consensus of the Board.

The Board also requested that the administration reexamine its ethical training and awareness, and take steps to reinvigorate/educate/reinforce the proper way to file complaints or report questionable ethical matters without fear of retribution.

The Board further requested that the administration promptly inform SACS of the results of the investigation.

#### D. Other Board Actions

The Board concluded and reported that the investigation found no evidence of undue influence by the President of the University. However, recognizing the existence of a close professional relationship between the President and one of the administrators named in the original anonymous allegation, the Board and the President agreed that the President should have no further involvement in the response to the investigation or the implementation of recommended personnel actions. Instead, Provost Gottfredson was charged with making recommendations in response to the investigation.

### VI. Review and Action by the University Provost

#### A. The Investigation

Per the Board's request, Dr. Gottfredson telephoned SACS President Wheelan on June 30<sup>th</sup> and provided a verbal report on the results of the Board of Visitors' investigation. He assured Dr. Wheelan that a written report would be provided in due course.

Following receipt of a communication from Dean Holsworth protesting the conduct of Assurance Services' investigation and review, the Board requested that prior to undertaking further actions the Provost review the Assurance Services' report, and inform the Board whether in his judgment it contained errors of fact or errors of conclusion.

On July 3, 2008, Provost Gottfredson reported to the Board as follows:

I have reviewed the report of VCU Assurance Services and have studied summaries of key interviews conducted by its

staff and/or director. In addition, I have interviewed Dean Robert Holsworth, Dean Jon Steingass and Dr. Robyn Lacks, and have discussed the investigation at length with Mr. Bunce and his associate, Ms. Rhonda Bishop.

In my opinion, the report provided to the Board by VCU Assurance Services does not contain material errors of fact or of conclusion.

It is the case that all persons whom I interviewed expressed discomfort with the investigation and with some investigatory methods. In my view, however, the investigation appears to have been conducted with professionalism, with only one possible exception.<sup>1</sup> This professionalism is in accord with my experience with Assurance Services over the past 11 years in a variety of difficult circumstances.

Given this conclusion, Provost Gottfredson was directed to proceed with the Board directive to pursue appropriate personnel actions and review those actions with the Board.

#### B. Personnel

On July 8, 2008, the Provost reported to the Board as follows:

At a closed session meeting held June 27, 2008, Virginia Commonwealth University's Board of Visitors received a report from Mr. Richard O. Bunce, Jr., Executive Director of VCU Assurance Services, concerning anonymous allegations

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<sup>1</sup> An investigator made mention of an impending tenure review during one session with Dr. Robyn Lacks, who clearly perceived that to be threatening. On learning of this, Provost Gottfredson immediately telephoned Dr. Lacks to apologize that this had happened, and followed this with a letter that stated (in part) "as provost I will do everything that I can to assure that your Promotion and Tenure review is fair, and that only appropriate issues of performance with respect to your faculty responsibilities will be considered as that review proceeds through the University's processes." Following the regular August meeting of the Board of Visitors, the Rector issued a statement reading (again, in part) "While there has been some debate concerning the intensity of the investigation, especially in the context of an academic environment, the Board had an overall responsibility to find the truth to the extent possible, and believes it appropriately fulfilled that obligation. We regret that there is a perception that the Board would take any action to disrupt the normal tenure process. It has not done so, and the Board fully supports the tenure policy and process at VCU. The policies and procedures related to investigations are routinely reviewed by the Audit and Compliance Committee and the Academic and Health Affairs Policy Committee."

that a Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies (BIS) degree had been awarded in violation of the University's requirements as well as of guidelines promulgated by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), VCU's regional accrediting body.

Consistent with the discussion following the receipt of the report, and following my independent review of the information compiled by Mr. Bunce and his staff upon which the aforementioned report was based, I want to report certain information and actions that have been taken to date as well as actions that I anticipate will occur within the very near future.

Those actions and anticipated actions are as follows:

- I have accepted the resignation of one of the University's deans, who will be leaving Virginia Commonwealth University effective July 25, 2008.
- I propose to accept the resignation from the deanship of another of the University's top administrators, and propose to reassign that individual to my office, as Special Assistant to the Provost. Accordingly, this individual will have no direct reports, either faculty or staff, and will have no budgetary responsibility. The individual will continue to have teaching responsibilities.
- I propose to provide a faculty member with a letter of counsel and caution.

The Board of Visitors accepted these recommended actions, and they have been implemented. While the resignations were voluntary, both were proffered with the understanding that removal from administrative positions was the alternative. All personnel actions taken were fully consistent with and assured protection of faculty rights and responsibilities and were consistent with University tenure and promotion policies. Further, the new dean of University College will report only to the Vice Provost for Instruction, unlike the former Dean who had additional reporting responsibilities as Associate Dean of the College of Humanities and Sciences. This action will preclude a dual

reporting responsibility and any real or perceived conflicts in duties going forward.

### C. Preliminary Review of Policies, Processes and Procedures Related to the Awarding of Degrees

Working in concert with the Department of Assurance Services, a preliminary review of University policies, processes and procedures suggests several areas of potential improvement concerning the university's graduation policies and procedures.

While we believe that there are opportunities to strengthen our graduation policies and procedures, it is important to note that the current practices have yielded very strong results over the past five and one-half years. While the events leading to this review represent a serious matter, they were not the result of systemic weaknesses.

#### 1. Degree Revocation

VCU's currently stated policy allows for revocation of an awarded degree only for academic misconduct by the student prior to the awarding of the degree. The circumstances of this case suggest that it would be appropriate to expand the current policy to clearly provide the University the needed flexibility to correct errors that may occur in the awarding of its degrees. An expansion of that policy, combined with increased communication to and acknowledgement by students of understanding and compliance with the requirements recommended below, should provide increased protection for the integrity of University degrees awarded and clearly enable the University to correct errors that might occur in the future.

#### 2. Academic Regulations and Appeals

VCU's current policies explicitly forbid any appeal of decisions rendered by the Academic Regulations Appeals Committee (ARAC). During the investigation, several individuals expressed concern over some past ARAC decisions and expressed a need for some opportunity to appeal adverse decisions to a higher authority. The investigation in this case revealed that for exceptions properly requested to the regulation concerning residency, the majority were approved. Nevertheless, the fact that there is no process for appeal of ARAC decisions could be viewed as problematic. It may be that an appropriate addition would be for the Provost to have the right, but not responsibility, to receive an appeal – whether proffered by a student, a faculty member, or an administrator. This and other possible approaches will be considered further.

### 3. Communication of Students' Responsibilities to Understand & Satisfy Graduation Requirements

A key issue with which the Board of Visitors and the University Administration grappled in the course of this process was whether the affected student was aware of VCU's graduation policies and requirements. Without doubt, this should be an expectation and responsibility of the student that is clearly communicated several times during a student's experience. Ways we might strengthen our efforts to communicate those responsibilities and requirements could include:

- Referencing the detailed information in the University and school admissions packages, and placing responsibility on the student to research and satisfy those requirements;
- Allowing students to register on-line only after acknowledging that they have read the student bulletin and understand degree and school requirements, and;
- Developing processes for manual registrations to ensure that students make the same acknowledgements as in the on-line process.

### 4. Graduation Application

The current graduation application does not contain a certification by the student that he/she understands and has satisfied the graduation requirements for the degree for which he/she has applied. Further, while we require signatures of a student's advisor, chair, and dean on the graduation application, we do not require that these officials certify that the student's academic record satisfies graduation requirements. These forms should be revised to strengthen those representations and clearly establish responsibility for attesting to the fulfillment of degree requirements.

### 5. Registrar Review

The Registrar's office was of great assistance during this investigation, and we recognize that its work volume is heavy, particularly during periods of peak demand. However, additional oversight by that office would greatly increase the controls over the degree process and significantly increase the integrity of the award process. The following

recommendations will add to the already significant demands on the Registrar's office, and may require additional staff.

The Registrar's office currently checks graduation applications primarily for the dean's approval. Due to heavy volume in a condensed time frame, the office cannot check the accuracy of all information included on the application, and presumes that other responsible officials have compared students' academic records to degree requirements.

However, it sometimes is the case that not all information required on the application is provided. In particular, the section relative to the residency requirement should be completed, and we should have the Registrar require that section to be completed before processing the application. The dean/chair/advisor should certify that a) the candidate will satisfy the 25%/30 of the last 45 requirement (and that wording is inaccurate on the application and needs to be changed) or b) the Academic Regulations Appeals Committee approved an exception to the last 25% of credits requirement (again, the wording should be revised).

We also need to consider special automated reports to determine whether candidates will have satisfied both the "30 of the last 45" requirement and the 120 hours requirement. This might be challenging based on the interim status/pending completion of key requirements, but it is one potential review that should be considered and evaluated as to feasibility.

## 6. Communication of Policies and Procedures to Faculty

Policies and procedures concerning graduation requirements, the application of transfer credits and other matters are clearly articulated in the Student Bulletin. They are not, however, articulated in the Faculty Handbook maintained by the Office of the Provost. This oversight must be corrected.

### D. Preliminary Review of Policies and Practices Governing Standards of Conduct

As members of an academic institution, VCU employees, including faculty (teaching and research faculty, administrative and professional faculty, and adjunct appointments) and staff (classified, hourly, student employees, and postdoctoral trainees), both full- and part-time, are expected to maintain the highest standards and conduct their work with the utmost integrity at all times. These values and standards are at the core of what the VCU Board of Visitors, the administration, the faculty and the staff work together to achieve.

Many policies, procedures and guidelines exist to help VCU employees uphold these high expectations. Among the most salient of these are the following:

### 1. VCU Code of Ethics

Virginia Commonwealth University is committed to an environment of uncompromising integrity and ethical conduct. Our ethical standards are the foundation for our decisions and actions. As members of the faculty, staff and administration of Virginia Commonwealth University our actions will be guided by these principles and values:

- Respect: We will respect individuals, diversity and the rights of others.
- Honesty: We will act and communicate honestly and candidly. We will not mislead others.
- Excellence: We will strive for excellence in all that we do.
- Responsibility and Accountability: We will be responsible and accountable for our decisions and actions.
- Stewardship: We will be good stewards of the resources entrusted to the university.
- Compliance: We will understand and comply with the codes, laws, regulations, policies and procedures that govern our university activities.

We recognize that our decisions and actions reflect not only upon our individual reputations but also upon the reputation of the University. Our actions will be guided by these ethical principles even when confronted by personal, professional, social or economic pressures. See <http://www.vcu.edu/president/pdf/code-of-ethics.pdf>.

### 2. VCU Creed

Academic institutions exist, among other reasons, to discover, advance and transmit knowledge and to develop in their students, faculty and staff the capacity for creative and critical thought. The VCU Creed addresses the all-important issue of community on the college campus. It identifies the values we believe in and strive to uphold as an academic community. At Virginia Commonwealth University, members of the academic community will strive to exemplify the specific ideals contained in the VCU Creed. See <http://www.vcu.edu/vcu/creed.php>.

### 3. VCU Code of Conduct

The Code of Conduct for Business Practices provides guidance to faculty and staff in the areas of financial, operational and administrative activities. Ethical behavior and compliance with laws, regulations and policies are the responsibility of every employee. This Code of Conduct applies to all employees, including faculty, staff, administration, and student employees who manage, supervise or conduct university business, financial and administrative transactions and activities. See <http://www.finance.vcu.edu/pdfs/codeofconduct.pdf>.

### 4. Additional Policies

In addition to these overarching statements of values and practice, Virginia Commonwealth University promulgates and enforces a large number of policies governing more specific areas of faculty, student, administration, and staff concern, such as the Honor Code ([http://www.provost.vcu.edu/pdfs/Honor\\_system\\_policy.pdf](http://www.provost.vcu.edu/pdfs/Honor_system_policy.pdf)), various potential conflicts of interest (<http://www.controller.vcu.edu/finpolicies/conflictinterest.htm>, <http://www.provost.vcu.edu/policies/conflict.html>, <http://www.hr.vcu.edu/policies/COI%20Overview.pdf>, [http://www.research.vcu.edu/p\\_and\\_g/coi.htm](http://www.research.vcu.edu/p_and_g/coi.htm)), computer ethics (<http://www.controller.vcu.edu/finpolicies/compethics.htm>), employee-student relationships (<http://provost.vcu.edu/pdfs/consensual-relationships-policy.pdf>), outside professional activities (<http://www.provost.vcu.edu/policies/profact.html#three>), misconduct in research and scholarly activity (<http://provost.vcu.edu/ppolicies/misconduct.html>), and others.

Policies and guidelines formally approved by the Board of Visitors are listed prominently on the provost's website (<http://www.provost.vcu.edu/policies/>). A complete listing of policies and guidelines developed for the administration of the university is available on the Administrative Toolkit (<http://www.toolkit.vcu.edu/>).

Finally, we note that the University takes very seriously its obligations under FERPA to protect the confidentiality of student records. The person or persons – presumably employed by the University – who made the original anonymous allegations violated that obligation. We must assure that every University employee having access to protected information understands our obligation, and that sanctions can be applied if we fail our students through violation of that obligation.

## VII. Compliance

Virginia Commonwealth University's Department of Assurance Services has assumed a leadership role in the development and promulgation of policies governing ethical and responsible behavior on the part of university personnel. In February 2006 the Board of Visitors authorized the establishment of a comprehensive compliance program. The program is modeled after the Federal Sentencing Guidelines and draft Compliance Program Guidance issued by the Office of the Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The University maintains a procedure for reporting concerns regarding compliance with applicable laws, regulations, policies and procedures (See <http://www.toolkit.vcu.edu/ComplianceConcernsProcedure.pdf>). The further development of such mechanisms is a central initiative of the comprehensive compliance program.

In July 2006, the Provost created the position of VCU ombudsperson for faculty and staff. The ombudsperson is a designated confidential and informal dispute resolution practitioner whose major function is to provide assistance to VCU faculty, staff and postdoctoral trainees. The ombudsperson is independent of VCU's normal reporting and managerial processes. This position listens to complaints, provides information, facilitates communication and helps arrange mediation or conflict resolution between or among members of VCU's faculty, staff and postdoctoral trainees (see <http://www.provost.vcu.edu/ombuds>).

## VIII. Conclusion

Following this investigation, Virginia Commonwealth University believes that its practices, policies and procedures relative to the awarding of undergraduate degrees have been sound, have safeguarded the integrity of our degrees, and have assured compliance with SACS accreditation guidelines. The overwhelming majority of our faculty and staff perform their duties with great integrity and pride, and assure fidelity to all requirements and procedures developed to protect the value of the VCU degree. Nonetheless, an important transgression of these practices, policies and procedures occurred that resulted in the awarding of a degree that did not satisfy the University's residency requirement, and that has resulted in considerable embarrassment to the institution.

The Board of Visitors concluded that this could not have happened without individuals in positions of trust making serious errors in judgment in the degree granting process. In addition, the Board was disappointed in the lack of cooperation it received during the investigation, and consequently directed the University administration to

pursue appropriate personnel actions in accordance with University and State policies.

These actions included the acceptance of resignations, either from the University or from administrative positions, of two University deans, Drs. Steingass and Holsworth, and a formal letter of counsel and caution to one faculty member. While the resignations were voluntary, both were proffered with the understanding that removal from administrative positions was the alternative. All personnel actions taken were fully consistent with and assured protection of faculty rights and responsibilities and were consistent with University administrative and tenure and promotion policies. Further, the Provost has severed the “dual report” nature of the position held by the dean of University College in an effort to avoid potential conflicts and opportunities for inappropriate influence in the future.

Our review also suggested that despite the uniqueness of the case under consideration (it having occurred once during a period in which over 15,000 degrees were awarded properly), procedural safeguards could be employed that would reduce the chances of a recurrence even further.

Finally, we believe that the University’s statements of values, ethics and responsible practice are exemplary; however, more can and will be done to assure fidelity to those values and to assure also that all University employees are aware of and comply with them. Beginning this fall, the President and Provost will lead University-wide discussions addressing these issues.

## Appendix

### Policies/Procedures Governing Evaluation of Credits for Graduation

#### Information Sent to Students

Copy of email from Registrar's Office (see attachment)

<http://www.vcu.edu/enroll/forms/graduation/>  
(graduation form)

<http://www.vcu.edu/enroll/forms/graduation/Undergraduate%20Graduation%20Application%20Instructions.pdf>  
(graduation application instructions)

Graduation application (see attachment)

#### Bulletin Information

<http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/undergraduate/?uid=10096&iid=30780>  
(degree requirements for all students)

[http://www.pubs.vcu.edu/bulletins/print\\_version.aspx?iid=30793](http://www.pubs.vcu.edu/bulletins/print_version.aspx?iid=30793)  
(appeal to waive an academic regulation)

<http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/undergraduate/?uid=10096&iid=30790>  
(graduation process)

#### Degree Evaluation

([http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/print\\_version.aspx?iid=30787](http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/print_version.aspx?iid=30787))  
(degree evaluation found in bulletin)

Degree Evaluation Substitution/Waiver Form (attached)