

State Council of Higher Education for Virginia



Report on Public Comment on Tuition Increases Pursuant to Virginia Code §23.1-307

July 31, 2020



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INTRODUCTION

Pursuant to section § 23.1-307 of the Code of Virginia, public institutions of higher education may not approve an increase in undergraduate tuition or mandatory fees without providing students and the public a projected range of the planned increase, an explanation of the need for the increase, and notice of the date, time and location of the meeting at which public comment is permitted. Institutions' boards of visitors must permit public comment and establish policies, which may include reasonable time limitations.

In addition, section G of the Code requires the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) to submit a report on the required public comment, as follows:

No later than August 1 of each year, the Council shall provide to the Governor and the Chairmen of the House Committee on Appropriations, the House Committee on Education, the Senate Committee on Education and Health, and the Senate Committee on Finance a report on any increase in undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees at a public institution of higher education, the public comment relating to such increase in undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees, and any deviation in the increase in undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees from the increase projected in the institutional six-year plan provided pursuant to § [23.1-306](#).

SCHEV annually reports on Tuition and Fees at public institutions of higher education by August 1 of each year. The Tuition and Fee report fulfills the first and third required components described in § 23.1-307 G, regarding increases in undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees, as well as any deviation in the increase from that projected in the institutional six-year plan. Thus, this report focuses solely on the second topic, public comment relating to increases in undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees. General observations of the process are included in the subsequent pages. Appendix 1 includes the nature of how comments were received and what institutions submitted to SCHEV as their general characterization of the public comment period.

PUBLIC COMMENT ON INCREASES IN TUITION AND MANDATORY FEES

Pre-COVID Crisis Board of Visitors' Meetings.

Prior to March 12, 2020, the date of Governor Northam's Executive Order 51 declaring a state of emergency due to the coronavirus, few Virginia public institutions had convened their

boards to make decisions about tuition and fees for the 2020-21 academic year. Four meetings occurred between October 2019 and March 12, 2020. ¹

All of the institutions held a public comment period at these meetings. At two of these meetings, no individual appeared in person to present comment. However, one institution received 11 written comments and shared them with board members during the course of the meeting. At one board meeting, seven individuals spoke. Another institution had three individuals speak during its meeting. This institution did not receive additional written comments.

Post-COVID Crisis Boards of Visitors Meetings

After Governor Northam issued Emergency Order 51 in mid-March, public bodies in Virginia canceled their planned spring meetings. The conduct of public business, including the important agendas of the institutions' boards of visitors, drew to a temporary halt pending evaluation of the impact of the coronavirus. Virginia's public meeting laws prohibit public bodies from meeting remotely except under certain narrow circumstances. In the meantime, the disruption to higher education caused by coronavirus raised many questions about how the institutions would proceed with any previously determined plans regarding tuition and fee increases.

An amendment to the state budget adopted in May allowed public bodies to hold meetings by electronic means during the crisis. The institutions' boards pivoted quickly, developing the technological capacity to convene remotely and provide opportunities for public comment in this new environment.

Two institutions had meetings scheduled in March at which the board was to consider tuition and fee increases. One went forward with its meeting on March 19, 2020, and only one person appeared to speak, although the board received 56 additional comments. Although the pandemic likely affected public turnout at the meeting, the institution noted that few people pre-registered for comment prior to when limitations on public gatherings went into effect. The second institution canceled a March meeting at which there were to be two speakers who had pre-registered. Once the rescheduled meeting occurred in May, the board was no longer considering an increase in tuition and fees and thus did not hold a public comment period.

¹ The College of William & Mary held a meeting on October 22, 2019; The University of Virginia held a meeting on November 8, 2019; the Virginia Community College System held a meeting on January 16, 2020; The University of Mary Washington held a meeting on February 20, 2020.

Eight institutions of higher education held board of visitors meetings between April and June.² One institution did not provide a public comment period because the board was not considering an increase in tuition and fees. Others provided notice of the meeting and the opportunity to speak and offered an alternative means by which individuals could submit written comment. The meetings attracted a total of 11 speakers and 137 written comments.

² George Mason University held a board meeting on April 2, 2020; Radford University held a board meeting on April 17, 2020; Old Dominion University held a board meeting on April 23, 2020; James Madison University held a board meeting on April 28, 2020; Virginia Commonwealth University held a board meeting on May 5, 2020; Christopher Newport University held a board meeting on June 4, 2020; Virginia Military Institute held a board meeting on June 10, 2020; Longwood University held a board meeting on June 12, 2020.

APPENDIX 1: INSTITUTIONAL SUBMISSIONS REGARDING PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

Number of individuals presenting at the meeting/number of additional comments received and shared with board members (email, online, website, etc.)

Institution	In-Person	Additional Comments	Total
CNU	0	0	0
GMU	3	23	26
JMU	2	100	102
LU	0	0	0
ODU	3	0	3
RU	0	0	0
UMW	3	0	3
UVA/UVA-W	7	[See next table]	7 +
VCCS	0	0	0
VCU	1	14	15
VMI	2	2	4
VSU	0	2	2
VT	1	56	57
W&M	3	11	14

General Characterization of the Public Comment Period (i.e., means of publicity, description of comments, board member comments or other relevant information)

Institution	General Characterization of the Public Comment Period As Submitted by Institutions to SCHEV
CNU	There was no tuition and fee increase recommended or approved and, therefore, there was no public comment period.
GMU	<p>Posted on BOV website; posted physically on campus; noted on Mason website; noticed in Mason community newsletter "The George;" notice emailed to student groups via Office of University Life.</p> <p>Students largely opposed tuition increase, requesting freeze in tuition. Rector expressed that the decisions on the Commonwealth budget would influence Mason's finances and that information was limited at the time of the comment session (April 2) due to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>

JMU	<p>The notice was placed on the main webpage and the Board of Visitors webpage 30 days prior to the board meeting where tuition and fees was to be determined. An email was sent to all students, as well as a reminder email of how to sign up for a time to participate in the public comment period. A presentation was made at the beginning of the public comment period outlining the university's financial obligations, the state support provided to the university, and the rationale behind</p>
	<p>the proposed tuition and fees. The majority of the comments expressed the desire for no increase; however, many did not understand the different "buckets" of money (E&G/Auxiliary) and what those dollars support nor what the university needs to cover based on state mandates (salaries, benefits, etc.).</p>
LU	<p>The Longwood University Board of Visitors' bylaws provide an opportunity for members of the public and University community to address the board at each meeting. Their policy ensures that individuals who wish to provide public comment have access to the full Board. The tuition and fee notice that the University posted on its website informed students and the community that public comment would be accepted by the Board of Visitors on June 12, 2020, prior to any board action on tuition and fees. Anyone wishing to provide written public comment was encouraged to email the President's Office. The University did not receive any written public comment, nor did anyone attend the meeting on June 12 to provide public comment.</p>
ODU	<p>Notice of the public comments period, in accordance with Board policy 1106 (https://www.odu.edu/content/dam/odu/offices/bov/policies/1100/bov1106.pdf) was posted on the Commonwealth Calendar, ODU's website and communicated via email to the media and key student leaders. Written comments were also invited via email to the Board's student representative. No written comments were received.</p> <p>Comments were received at the Board meeting on April 23, 2020 from three individuals: the Board's student representative, the president of the Student Government Association and the SGA's director of student life. Their comments noted ODU's affordability, opportunities for student employment and internships and commitment to social mobility, urging the Board to keep these valued programs in mind when considering the upcoming budget and impact to revenue due to COVID-19.</p>

RU	<p>Radford University provided notice on April 1, 2020 for the May 1, 2020 meeting, A Budget Presentation and Public Comment Session was scheduled for April 17, 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Governor's Executive Order, the session was available via Zoom, and the connection information was provided to the public. Three Board members were present in the Board Room. The Rector opened the session. President Hemphill provided comments. Vice President of Finance and Administration Chad A. Reed presented a financial overview in preparation for fiscal cycle 2020-2021. No one requested to speak beforehand or following the presentation, and no written comments were received.</p>
UMW	<p>Means of Publicity: There were three different posting dates: February 7, 2020, February 10, 2020, and February 14, 2020. Public notices were posted on UMW website (2/7 and 2/14); Commonwealth Calendar (2/14); with local media (2/7 and 2/14): Free Lance-Star; Radio Station B10.5; Fredericksburg Today; Fredericksburg Patch; Inside Nova.com; UMW Blue and Gray Press; UMW Eagle</p>



	<p>Eye (2/10); UMW President's Office (2/7 and 2/14); Susha Subramanian/Asst. Professor of English, Linguistics, and Communications (2/14); Fredericksburg Circuit Court (2/14) *</p> <p>Description of Comments: 1) James Farmer Multicultural Center; 2) Retention Rates of the University; 3) Talley Counseling Center *Board Member Comments: There were no comments made by Board members to the public commenters. By consensus, the Board members were pleased with the session and particularly impressed by the three UMW students who spoke.</p>
<p>UVA and UVA-W</p>	<p>Regarding additional comments received, there were very few individual comments. A remote system was used to send Board members mass messages with very similar content. UVA learned that it was a remote system when the Rector answered a few of these e-mails and the students responded that they never sent the original messages.</p> <p>Publicity:</p> <p>UVA publicly noticed the meetings on the Commonwealth Calendar and on the University's website (in a couple of places). The vice president for finance met with student council about tuition and mentioned the public comment period. The student board members at both UVA and Wise advertised the public comment period on Facebook and through flyers.</p> <p>Recap of Meetings: <u>Charlottesville</u></p> <p>Following a welcome and introduction by Rector Murray, J.J. Davis and Liz Magill gave a short presentation on the strategic goals, value proposition, Access UVA, declining state appropriation, tuition philosophy, and the proposal for undergraduate tuition and fee increases. The slide presentation can be found here: UVA Slide Presentation.</p> <p>Five people spoke during the public comment session: four students and one representing Partners for College Affordability and Public Trust (PCAPT).</p> <p>The following comments were made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Board's primary duty is to the Commonwealth and UVA has sufficient assets to hold or decrease tuition. She acknowledged the generous financial aid provided to students, but said the University had the financial capacity to freeze tuition and so the Board should do that. • Students don't want more "benevolence" in the form of financial aid, just lower tuition for everyone. • Focused on mental health services to students. Advocated for more embedded therapist positions in the schools, and more positions at CAPS. • Housing costs keep going up but the quality and quantity do not improve. • The Board should look for other ways of raising funds rather than through tuition and fees.

	<p><u>College at Wise</u></p> <p>Rector Murray opened the meeting and Donna Henry, Sim Ewing, and Chris Dearth spoke about rankings, affordable access, and the College's tuition setting philosophy. Sim Ewing said tuition at the College is the third lowest in the state. The slides are available here: College at Wise Slides.</p> <p>Two students spoke. The first expressed his hope that the increase would be covered for those on financial aid. The second said a 3% increase is substantial for out-of-state students, and as an international student, she is not eligible for federal financial aid.</p>
VCCS	<p>The VCCS advertised the meetings as required, though they did not consider a tuition increase. Because of COVID, the VCCS Board met virtually and offered to receive written comments.</p>



VCU	<p>Applauded the university for not increasing tuition and encouraged the university to look at the increase in fees considering the current situation. Highlighted that the country is in a crisis. This is an opportunity for the university to communicate with the community. The tuition freeze and being aware of students' current situations is a way to show that the university cares about students.</p>
VMI	<p>Commonwealth Calendar, website, locations on Post; public comment period lasted for approximately 10-minutes; the public comment was not related to tuition and fees.</p>
VSU	<p>Virginia State University scheduled a public comment meeting on the subject of a proposed increase in undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees on March 23, 2020. Due to public health concerns caused by COVID-19, the Board of Visitors cancelled the meeting. When the Board held its annual meeting on May 21, 2020, the University administration did not recommend an increase in the undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees for 2020-2021. Therefore, the University did not hold a public comment meeting.</p> <p>Regarding publicity, the University posted the public comment meeting announcement to the front page of its website, the Commonwealth Calendar, and forwarded a copy to the local media. The University posted cancellation notices in the same manner. The University received two comments, which were submitted on the speaker's registration form for the March 23, 2020 meeting. The comments expressed concerns about the tuition increase that would take place next school year for out-of-state students and funding for graduating students in anticipation of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meeting cancellation notices were sent to the two registered speakers.</p>

VT	<p>On February 27, 2020, Virginia Tech issued the required public notice announcing the proposed range of tuition/fee increases and the public comment workshop on March 19. The workshop was advertised repeatedly in the university’s daily email and featured on the Board of Visitors (BOV) webpage. Speakers were required to pre-register, and if any time remained, then walk-ins would be given the opportunity to speak. The Secretary to the Board contacted the presidents of the Student Government Association (SGA) and Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) to invite them to speak. Written comments could also be submitted online through the BOV webpage or via mail.</p> <p>The one-hour public comment period was preceded by a presentation by the Senior Vice President and Chief Business Officer covering the budget and factors considered in setting tuition and fees. Five of the 14 BOV members traveled from Northern Virginia and the Richmond area to Blacksburg for the public comment period, which fell at the very beginning of the containment efforts just as the spread of COVID-19 in the U.S. was beginning to accelerate. Perhaps as a result, four of the five scheduled speakers did not show up to speak. The sole speaker was an undergraduate student who opposed a tuition increase in the context of</p>
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	<p>rising costs. Only the president of the GSA contacted the Board Secretary to indicate their change of plans, and they submitted written comments instead.</p> <p>Nearly all of the 56 written comments were submitted by graduate students who opposed the increase in mandatory fees; some also opposed the tuition increase. They cited the low stipends for graduate assistants and the increasing cost of living, in particular the relatively sharp increase in housing costs in Blacksburg over the past year. There was also some mention of the pandemic and concern about rising costs.</p>
<p>W&M and RBC</p>	<p>The public comment period was announced to the media, posted on the Commonwealth Calendar and on the Board of Visitors web page along with a link to a public comment form. All members of the Board were informed of the public hearing and invited to attend.</p> <p>Financial Affairs Committee chair James Hixon along with Rector John Littel, Board Secretary Sue Gerdelman, and Board members Karen Schultz and Anne Leigh Kerr attended. A Flat Hat reporter and two students attended but made no comment. A brief budget overview was presented by the Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration, Sam Jones, and the Vice President for Finance and Technology, Amy Sebring. The Rector opened the floor for comment and as there was none from the public, Mr. Jones read the comments received online. Suggestions ranged from encouraging W&M to lobby the state for more funds to options for the athletic fee and a request for solar panels on the roof of Kaplan Arena. All comments were shared with the full Board prior to their November meeting.</p> <p>Richard Bland College does not consider tuition until the spring meeting. However, the W&M increase was rescinded at the May 2020 meeting and RBC held tuition at the same level as FY20. Since tuition and mandatory fees for FY21 for both W&M and RBC will remain flat, no public comment period has been held this year.</p>

