

Exploring Educational Institutions in the Role of Community Partners

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science
University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

Bailey Addison Biber

Spring, 2020

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

Advisor

Sean M. Ferguson, Department of Engineering and Society

Introduction

Currently, 20% of families in central Virginia live below the poverty line, and Charlottesville, VA ranks in the top 25 metropolitan cities with the largest wage gap, along with Key West, FL and Santa Barbara, CA (Sommeiller, 2018). For many of these people, a lack of social capital is a main factor in their inability to provide for themselves and their families. Social capital is the actual and potential resources available to an individual, facilitated through a series of connections and social networks. Scholars agree that the erosion or loss of social capital in an underprivileged community is a root cause for many social problems, including, but not limited to, unemployment, weakened family structures, political discord, and social incoherence (Portes, 1998), (Putnam, 1993). In the case of Charlottesville, this is a stark contrast to the majority of the population of the University of Virginia, located just a short drive away from downtown Charlottesville. A prominent research university, widely recognized in academia with millions of dollars annually in endowments, professors often make upwards of 6 figures and students get offered internships and jobs from the best companies in business, technology, and finance. The result is a graduation rate of 93% and an average starting salary for undergraduates of \$60,000 in 2018 (UVA 2018 First Destinations Report, n.d.), nearly \$10,000 higher than the national average for college graduates (Miller, 2019), and nearly \$25,000 higher than that of non-college graduates (Torpey, 2018). There is no lack of funding or resources available to students and faculty of the University, so why does this severe gap exist between UVA and the surrounding community?

This phenomenon is not exclusive to UVA and Charlottesville; well-established educational institutions all across the country are incredibly successful in their own right, but fail

to see the full potential that leveraging their extensive multitude of resources can have in aiding surrounding communities by way of social capital creation. However, there is existing and rapidly growing evidence of educational institutions increasing their involvement in community outreach through the creation and upkeep of social capital. The analysis at hand is examining the efficacy of these efforts, the impact they have on surrounding communities, and the viability of introducing similar endeavors at UVA and other academic institutions nationwide. As colleges and universities are beginning to establish programs in this domain, the increasing trend for educational institutions is that focusing solely on education is no longer sufficient. Through the analysis of existing case studies that showcase efforts to create social capital, this paper will be investigating how educational institutions can establish themselves as community partners in order to facilitate the growth of social capital in neighboring communities, and what that social capital can do to create self-sufficient individuals that contribute to a thriving economy.

Framework for Evaluation

In any communities impacted by poverty, low or no social capital is associated with negative outcomes such as lack of safety, lack of trust, little to no public resources, and exacerbating the status quo of inability to move up within society or improve one's current situation. According to Lukasiewicz (2019), there are three types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding is the closest of ties, formed between homogeneous people and communities. Bonding social capital provides social support, allowing people to "get by" on a daily basis. For example, a family member providing financial support to someone whose resources have been depleted. While this type of social capital is beneficial for day to day support, it only enables horizontal action, which does not help overcome poverty, but rather

reinforces the status quo. Bridging and linking social capital are somewhat weaker ties between diverse groups and external resources, such as an institution separate from a community or people from different backgrounds. These forms of social capital allow for vertical action, or breaking the status quo and “getting ahead” (Lukasiewicz et al., 2019). Solely having bonding social capital without the addition of bridging or linking social capital can actually prevent community members from accessing larger beneficial networks that can open doors to services, education, and opportunities (Allen-Meares, 2008). While the positive effect of bonding social capital is not to be overlooked in many communities, the main focus of this paper will be on the creation of bridging and linking social capital as it pertains to academic institutions and the surrounding communities.

As defined by the University of Minnesota (Horntvedt, 2012), social capital is the “glue that holds communities together” (p. 1). There are countless benefits that result from the strengthening of social capital, both bridging and linking, in a community. To discuss just a few, children in communities with higher levels of social capital tend to score higher on standardized tests such as the SAT, have lower drop-out rates, and are less violent than in communities that have failed to cultivate social capital. Looking at the broader community, social capital also reduces the prevalence of drastic health problems resulting from colds, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, and other sources of premature death. Lastly, the creation of social capital helps to facilitate more responsive representative governance, greater tax compliance, and more blood donations (Horntvedt, 2012). Social capital emphasizes that social networks have great value, and that through the “structural convergence of people, action will result” (Coleman, 1988).

At first glance, the connection between colleges and universities and the social capital of surrounding communities may not be apparent. However, the creation of social capital is incredibly relevant to these institutions by way of the potential students and community members that are being impacted. Social capital is directly linked to college access and completion (The Role of Social Capital in College Access and Completion, 2016), an area that educational institutions have great stake in. As stated in the article from College Now Greater Cleveland, natural intelligence, ability, and hard work can only get individuals, especially students, so far in life. The final piece is being able to leverage external resources that will enable them to achieve great success in life. This comes from the creation of social capital, as previously discussed. The implications of having, or not having, social capital are very prevalent throughout the entirety of the college process, including the college search and application phase, enrollment, and post-college.

Community partnerships are mutually beneficial relationships for both the university and the surrounding community. Universities share their knowledge and resources, helping community members gain bridging and linking social capital, which is vital for social, economic, and political advancement. This can aid low-income communities in altering their social and economic conditions for the better. Additionally, universities gain information that can drive research and students gain experience in translating their acquired knowledge to real world applications within their own community. Finally, community partnerships help universities, especially public ones, fulfill their “social compact” to the general public (Allen-Meare, 2008). Public universities are expected by the public to, in return for the liberty to conduct research and other scholarly pursuits, use the knowledge gained from these pursuits in a way that is relevant

and applicable to solving social problems and educating students in a way that allows them to meaningfully contribute to today's social, economic, and political climate. Using this framework of building social capital in communities, this paper will evaluate numerous cases in which academic institutions attempt to do just that, and analyze the ways in which they are successful, where there are shortcomings, and how institutions looking to improve in this aspect can shape their efforts.

Evidence and Analysis

Network2Work Case Study

Cultivating bridging and linking social capital among low-income Charlottesville residents is the focus of Network2Work, Piedmont Virginia Community College's employee preparation and job placement program. I spoke with Frank Squillace, director of Network2Work, to get a better idea of how they are addressing the disconnect between employers and potential employees in Charlottesville. The main issue in Charlottesville with job matching stems from the barriers that many low-income citizens face that prevent them from being successful in an occupation. Examples of these barriers include proper training, access to transportation, and the ability to provide childcare while at work. Many traditional employment matching programs are not aware of these barriers and therefore do nothing to address them. Without properly addressing these barriers, many of these potential employees will not be successful in the job and will quit or be fired within as little as a week of starting. Job matching is more than just obtaining the position, it is being able to succeed in keeping the position as well, changing the cycle of barriers which enforces dependencies and prevents self-sufficiency. Network2Work recognizes these barriers and aims to address them by reverse engineering the

traditional job market system. Before even beginning the job application, the program takes care of the potential employee by addressing barriers through state government funded job training, child support, health care, and grants for car repairs, work equipment, and any other miscellaneous necessities. By putting more time into the client upfront, they are set up to be more successful in their job in the long run.

Once Network2Work has tackled the barriers facing potential employees, they aim to find the best match between employee and employer. The strategy is to utilize “connectors,” contacts within the community that are socially in touch with who is looking for a job and where their skills could best be utilized. These are often people like church pastors, social service workers, and other community members who have been trained in how to connect them to the program. This strategy is supported the social capital framework and the theory of weak ties, stating that weaker ties (such as bridging and linking social capital) are more useful in creating opportunities than strong ties (such as bonding social capital) with whom we feel the closest and are most similar to (Granovetter, 1973). Diverse people provide the most impactful opportunities because they are bringing something new or not previously accessible to the table. According to Squillace, Network2Work has a success rate of 85% to 95%, meaning the percentage of people who enter the system and complete the program, resulting in some type of job placement. While the program was only established in 2017, it has currently created \$8.7 million in wages, a number that shows great progress and no signs of slowing down any time soon. By linking people with limited resources to those with more readily available resources and connections, more opportunities become available and thus there is greater success for employees getting into and staying in the workplace.

Network2Work is a prime example of an academic institution going to the source of the problem, taking the time to fully understand the challenge at hand, and then using that knowledge to properly address it. Other institutions looking to make a similar economic impact as a community partner should look to the efforts of the Network2Work program as a basis for addressing issues relevant in their own community.

National Center for Education Statistics First-Generation College Student Study

Students leverage social capital when looking for resources and information to assist them in applying to and selecting the best college. Having access to a family member, friend, or community member with post-secondary education knowledge or experience is an incredibly useful asset to students looking to enroll in a college or university. This is backed by a study done by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics on first-generation college students. As is shown in figure 1, within ten years of graduating high school, 72% of students whose parents had no college experience at all had enrolled in post-secondary education. Comparatively, 84% of students whose parents had some college education had enrolled and 93% of students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree had enrolled (Planty, Bozick, & Ingels, 2006).

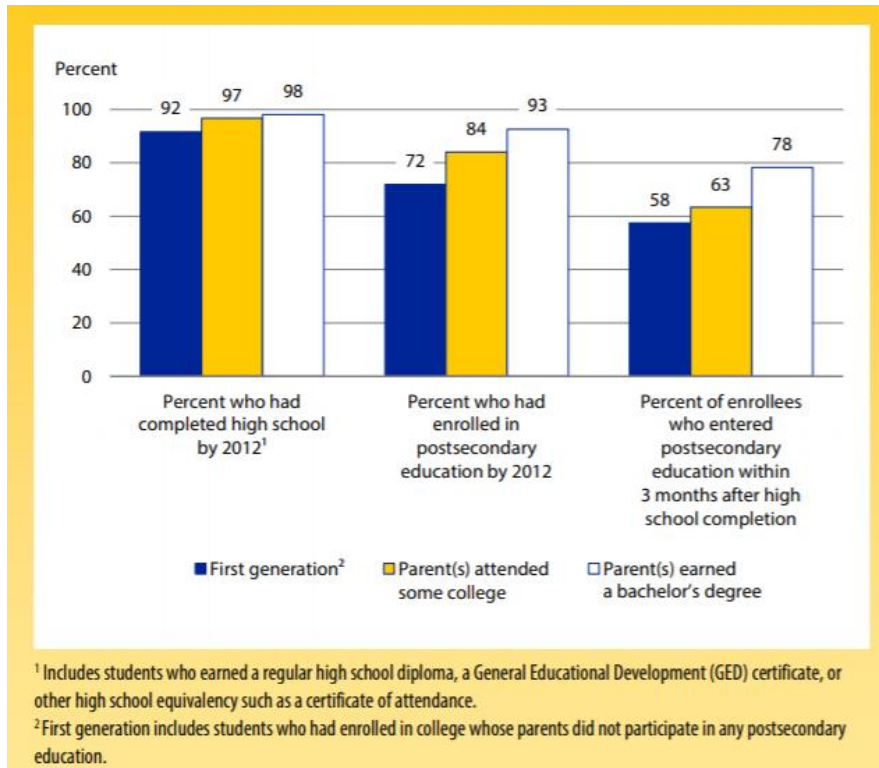


Figure 1. Percentage of 2002 high school sophomores who had completed high school, and percentage who had enrolled in postsecondary education, by parents' highest level of education: 2012

While this study focused solely on the parents of these students and not on other community resources, it is fair to hypothesize that there would be a similar trend, if not even more drastic, for students having no external resources with post-secondary education knowledge or experience.

Even once students have enrolled in college and enter the second phase of the process, students without social capital in the form of external resources to assist them throughout their time in college are much more likely to drop out and not return. As is shown in figure 2, first-generation college students are more than twice as likely (33% vs. 14%) to drop out of school without returning than students whose parents received a bachelor's degree.

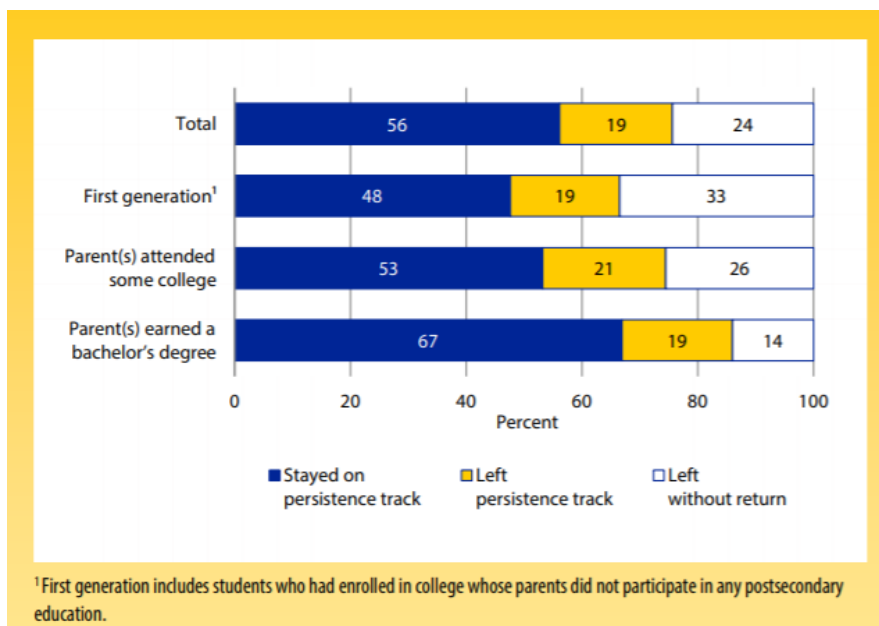


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of 2003-04 beginning postsecondary students' status on the persistence track after 3 years, by parents' highest level of education: 2006

The evidence is clear that students who have access to knowledgeable resources are better equipped to be successful getting into and staying in a post-secondary educational program. Looking at the impact that just one form of social capital can have on students provides a compelling case for the further development of social capital in students at the high school and college levels.

College Now Case Study

College Now is already working to help high school students build social capital by linking students with advisors who can provide them with adequate knowledge and resources to navigate the college process, including milestones that need to be hit, preparation for SATs/ACTs, financial aid, and keeping up with deadlines for applications. Additionally, once students are in college, College now offers scholarships that helps students build social capital

through a college mentoring program. These students are paired with a community member who acts as their mentor to help them overcome any barriers facing them throughout college. This strategy is very similar to how Network2Work links potential employees with "connectors", who guide them through obstacles they may face and keep them on the track to find and maintain a job. The only difference is these college mentors are working with students while they are still in school, with the end goal of completing their degree. The college mentor also helps the student build a professional network which will help them in the third phase of college, post-graduation, when searching for a job.

College Now recognized the importance of social capital for a student's success, and is committed to aiding students in developing that social capital, especially those who do not have the advantage of being born with access to it, such as first-generation students or students from low-income or non-traditional households. By acquire just a bit of social capital, students' potential for success increases exponentially, which in turn reflects well on the school they attend. The moral obligation schools have to their students should be reason enough to aid them in the building of social capital, but beyond morals and ethics, the business case for encouraging the growth of social capital in students is clear.

University of Michigan Detroit Center Case Study

An excellent example of a successful endeavor is the University of Michigan's UM Detroit Center, a community outreach center that acts as office, classroom, meeting, and event space for both the UM community and general public. The center serves 3 main purposes:

1. Create a structural presence for the University of Michigan in Detroit

2. Encourage new and ongoing education and research with Detroit community groups and other universities
3. Provide a centrally located base for many community-based efforts

Since being established in 2005, the UM Detroit center has been incredibly successful in building relationships between UM and the surrounding community by facilitating the cultivation of social capital. The UM Detroit center is an example that other universities can use as a model to replicate their success. For universities looking to make an impact in their surrounding community by way of social capital creation, the UM Detroit center provides an excellent framework to base these efforts on. There are a few key factors that make the UM Detroit center so successful: utilizing effective leadership to build a program based on existing strengths, addressing past failures in the university-community relationship, and encouraging an attitude of equal partnership between the institution and the public.

When looking to establish this community center in Detroit, the University of Michigan recognized the importance of selecting the best leaders possible to lead the charge, understanding that these people would be key players in the success of the program. The UM president, Dr. Mary Sue Coleman played a large role in the creation of the UM Detroit center, embracing and encouraging the opening of such a center. When selecting this central facilitator, it is important to select someone who has a reputation and/or experience as a community leader, has a historical presence in the community, and can be a bridge between the university and the community partners. Her enthusiasm at the forefront of the endeavor created an attitude that trickled down at all levels of the project. These types of projects are more likely to be successful with an

administration that has a history of personal participation and dedication to the social compact. Faculty must be educated on how to initiate contact with and form relationships in the community. Further, they must be willing to get out into the community, putting these skills to use by engaging in activities such as teaching a course for community members or participating in a local project outside of the university.

In some, although not all, cases of universities engaging in community outreach, the relationship between the university and the surrounding community may be fractured or hostile due to historical tensions. In these cases, it is important to address these past issues and encourage community members to voice these grievances in discussions and other forms of community participation. Past sentiments might include an imbalance in how the community viewed their worth in the partnership, especially in ethnic or economic minority groups, where the university's involvement has historically left community members feeling like a "laboratory participant" (Allen-Meares, 2008) or did not reap the benefits of the partnership. The negative connotation surrounding the relationship must be broken in order to move forward in any community endeavors, and thus the open communication between community and university is pertinent to the program's success.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is for the university to create an attitude that the partnership is one of mutual benefit and equals, not a hierarchal relationship. The community needs to be given access to the university and its resources, just as the university is getting access to the community members and their insights. Encouraging community members to actively contribute to the partnership's goals, outcomes, and evaluation creates a sense of a two-sided,

mutually beneficial relationship. This creates a culture of empowerment rather than dependency, which supports the cultivation of bridging and linking social capital. Further support for this idea can be seen in the development of UM's REACH (Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health) Detroit partnership. In creating the partnership, research personnel worked with community members to develop and create recruitment materials, consent forms, and discussion guides. The community members involved were well informed of the culture and issues of the community and played the role of discussion moderators. Community members played vital roles in collecting and analyzing data, giving them equal stake in the process. By considering both university personnel and community members experts, it levels the playing field and allows for a more collaborative effort where both parties could claim equal ownership of the project. By participating in the projects as equals, community members were able to develop connections outside of their typical circle, by definition increasing their social capital. Through this increase in social capital, community members felt invested in the project and more empowered to contribute more, which further increased their involvement and overall success of the project.

Discussion

UVA's Current Engagement

While UVA has many community outreach efforts, none explicitly focus on the creation of social capital. UVA definitely attempts to engage with the surrounding community in many ways, including student-run clubs, research projects, and community spaces, and is moving towards furthering these efforts in the Charlottesville community even more in the coming years. The way in which we evaluate these efforts is very important when considering the level of success we allocate to them. While many of these efforts have been successful in their own right,

giving students experience or temporarily improving a bad situation for Charlottesville residents, there is somewhat of a disconnect between the university community and the Charlottesville public. Upon hearing interviews with various Charlottesville residents, many feel that the relationships formed with UVA in the past have done more to serve the university rather than actually benefit the community. This can be seen in university projects or initiatives that begin well-intentioned but ultimately end prematurely, leaving the Charlottesville community members without support or the tools to be successful on their own. In some ways, these efforts create a culture of dependency and fails to truly address the problem at hand. Additionally, many university students and staff enter the community without a full understanding of the history between UVA and the city of Charlottesville, one that has been filled with turmoil since Thomas Jefferson first established the school in the 1800's. Without understanding this history and the lasting impacts it has, students and faculty cannot possibly enter the community prepared to be equal and adequate partners. It is not enough to simply engage with the community *more*, but rather UVA must work to engage with the community *better*. President Jim Ryan's plan for a "Good and Great University" (Hester, 2019) is a great step in improving upon UVA's community engagement. As the university begins to work towards these goals, there is a great opportunity to really consider and define the intent of their engagement and candidly evaluate these projects together with the Charlottesville community. Many of the goals stated in President Ryan's plan align with the development of social capital and the impact that results from programs that are successful in creating social capital.

Conclusion

The meaningful and ongoing development of social capital is paramount to the overall welfare of a community, especially one struggling socially or economically. Without it, the implications are devastating, rampant with unemployment, sentiments of distrust and vulnerability, and social disconnect. However, the opportunities to build social capital are readily available, at both the individual and institutional levels. Examples given by the University of Minnesota for the individual include simple actions such as mowing a neighbor's lawn or watching their child when childcare is not an option. Further, social capital can be built on a larger scale through institutional measures, through the employment of community-wide programs and policies, such as the UM Detroit Center and PVCC's Network2Work.

Ultimately, focusing on the creation of social capital changes the culture around community engagement to reflect a more collaborative effort when it comes to community partnerships. Traditional engagement only treats the material problem, but inadvertently perpetuates the problem by creating a culture of dependence, rather than creating self-sufficiency, sometimes creating problems where there weren't any to begin with. Social capital helps to address the root of the problem and systemically flips the system on its head. Social capital is more than a temporary fix for problems that may or may not exist, but rather an ongoing tool that enables a mutually beneficial relationship and thriving community that includes both universities and the public as one collective entity.

Bibliography

Allen-Meares, P. (2008). Schools of Social Work Contribution to Community Partnerships: The Renewal of the Social Compact in Higher Education, *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 18:2, 79-100, DOI: 10.1080/10911350802317194

The Role of Social Capital in College Access and Completion. (2016, September 16). Retrieved from <https://www.collegenowgc.org/2016/07/31/role-social-capital-college-access-completion/>

Coleman, J. (1988). Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95-S120. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/2780243

Granovetter, Mark S. (1973). The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360-80.

Hester, W. P. (2019, June 12). Ryan's 'Great and Good' Strategic Plan Wins Board Endorsement. Retrieved from <https://news.virginia.edu/content/ryans-great-and-good-strategic-plan-wins-board-endorsement>

Hornqvist, J. (2012). 'Social capital' makes communities better places to live. Retrieved from <https://extension.umn.edu/building-trust-communities/social-capital-makes-communities-better-places-live>.

Lukasiewicz, K et al. (2019). Getting by in New York City: Bonding, Bridging and Linking Capital in Poverty-Impacted Neighborhoods. *City & Community* (No. 1, Vol. 18).

Miller, S. (2019, August 22). Average Starting Salary for Recent College Grads Hovers Near \$51,000. Retrieved from [https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/compensation/pages/average-starting-salary-for-recent-college-grads.aspx)

[topics/compensation/pages/average-starting-salary-for-recent-college-grads.aspx](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/compensation/pages/average-starting-salary-for-recent-college-grads.aspx)

Planty, M., Bozick, R., & Ingels, S. J. (2006, November 22). Academic Pathways, Preparation, and Performance: A Descriptive Overview of the Transcripts from the High School

Graduating Class of 2003-04. Retrieved from

<https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007316>

Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual*

Review of Sociology, 24: 1–24.

Putnam, R. D. (1993). The prosperous community: Social capital and public life. *The American*

Prospect, 3(13), 35–42. Retrieved from

<http://www.prospect.org/web/page.wv?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=5175>

Sommeiller, E. (2018). The new gilded age: Income inequality in the U.S. by state, metropolitan

area, and county. [https://www.epi.org/publication/the-new-gilded-age-income-](https://www.epi.org/publication/the-new-gilded-age-income-inequality-in-the-u-s-by-state-metropolitan-area-and-county/)

[inequality-in-the-u-s-by-state-metropolitan-area-and-county/](https://www.epi.org/publication/the-new-gilded-age-income-inequality-in-the-u-s-by-state-metropolitan-area-and-county/).

Torpey, E. (2018, April). Measuring the value of education: Career Outlook. Retrieved from

<https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2018/data-on-display/education-pays.htm>

UVA 2018 First Destinations Report. (n.d.). Retrieved from

<https://career.virginia.edu/university-virginia-class-2018>