The Roosevelt Institute

Joshua Young

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When I met with President Crutcher in July, I believed we would have a brief meeting about my time abroad in Jordan and Morocco and perhaps my plans for the coming school year. Instead, we spoke for nearly an hour and a half and were told twice by his secretary, Martha Pittaway, that it was getting late and soon we would be the only ones in the building. In fact, we did end up leaving last, but not before he extended an invitation to me to become a mentor for his young men’s group. He also emphasized the need for our campus environment to be reflective of its constituent parts – there should not be a sharp growth in diversity on campus but a stagnation in cultural progression. In other words, the university needs not only to accept students from varying backgrounds but also to embrace them, to make them feel comfortable and to give them a voice. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a recent student review of the university on school review website Niche: “On paper this school looks very diverse. We have a wide range of students in terms of race and international status. However, people self-segregate most of the time, especially when it comes to social events...there is a very small minority of non-heterosexual-identifying students here, and while they are not publicly shamed, they are not openly accepted, either.”

Crutcher said his goal was to make it possible for every student, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or creed, to have a voice on campus and to be engaged in the day-to-day happenings in the student’s immediate environment. In line with this goal, Crutcher said he hoped the student body would translate tweets and YikYaks into face-to-face dialogues with multicultural audiences, and use their platforms to transform campus life and the greater community in positive ways. While discussing his endeavors toward these aims, the idea of founding a University of Richmond Roosevelt Institute chapter struck me as a great way to begin achieving Crutcher’s vision for the campus community. I first heard about the Institute from a friend and American student I met during my studies abroad in Morocco. She described the Roosevelt Institute as a non-partisan think tank in which issues of social justice, public policy and environmentalism to name a few are discussed in forums, and scholarly research is produced in order to enrich the foundation of knowledge on these subjects with the intent of bettering society. Since its founding in 1987, this goal has been internalized in hundreds of chapters that have produced lasting social, political
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and economic changes. Furthermore, the legacy of President Franklin Roosevelt for which the institute was named lives on in meaningful ways everyday.

Richmond had a chapter of the Roosevelt Institute already established, but for three years the chapter has been inactive. With Crutcher’s support, I set out to re-establish the Roosevelt Institute not only as a traditional think tank in which members conduct research and promote dialogue, but also as a landscape-altering body that produces legislation and actively commits to identifying problems and meaningful solutions. Additionally, the Roosevelt Institute seeks all students to be a part of the conversation, because we know that campus growth and the fruition of our collective visions depends upon collective action.

I have since received Crutcher’s blessing, along with his charge to identify seven other students to re-constitute the Roosevelt Institute here at Richmond. They are a brilliant, outgoing, talented and diverse group of leaders. The founding members are as follows: Ken Anderson and Mia Hagerty, the presidents of the RCSGA and WCGA respectively, Chelsey Davidson, a PPEL and leadership major and JSGA president, Andrew Aguillera, a leadership studies major and member of the Richmond Octaves, Elaine Diggs, a business major and a cheerleader, Haneen Abu Al Neel, a leadership studies major and an active member of the Embody Dance group, Ian Muir, an international studies major and captain of the club basketball team, and me, a leadership and international studies double major and senior senator of JSGA.

It may seem as though the Roosevelt Institute will overlap with the work of the RCSGA, WCGA and other student organizations in terms of student activism and creating a sacred space for discussion. However, instead of serving as a rival to any of the existing organizations, the Institute will work in collaboration with like-minded campus groups, whether that entails researching to draft legislation or providing the platform for other organizations to spread their messages to all sectors of the campus community. The nonpartisan nature of the institute alone makes it inclusive, and I believe in time it will lead to more campus solidarity, a staunch desire of President Crutcher.

As a team, we will aim to meet once a week for an hour to discuss our short-term and long-term goals, and how we plan to achieve them. In these meetings, we will also be discussing effective ways to promote the work of the Institute, evaluating what practices have been working and how we can best maximize those efforts. Also, each month we will use the feedback we receive from our peers, social media pages and the news to determine which topics and issues we will focus on for the month.

Once established, there will be a research team that explores the topics we have pinpointed. The hope is that at least twice per semester, we can reserve a large meeting space and invite members of the campus community to examine our findings and provide a space for them to voice their opinions in the presence of their peers, faculty and members of the local community.

Lastly, my intent for this student organization is to have a flat hierarchy. We are all leaders within this institute, and the responsibilities of the various offices will rotate, as I envision our leadership structure as being reflective of our collective aim and mission. We look forward to commencing our organization’s work in the fall and welcoming members of the student body to participate in whatever capacity they wish. It is my belief that we will come closer to fulfilling President Crutcher’s vision with our efforts.