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President Ayers: A Changing University

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President Ayers: A Changing University

Seven years is a long time to be President of anything. Just look at how gray President Obama’s hair looks after just five. Forum Magazine’s Editor-in-Chief John McAuliff sat down with President Ed Ayers to get a sense of the University of Richmond circa 2013. Ayers, a historian by trade, will try and place you at a point in time between the University we have been, and the one we are becoming—financially, geographically, and demographically. We’ll just let him tell you himself.

The Ayers Presidency is entering its seventh year. President Obama is in his fifth, any advice for him?

I admire his ability to have a sense of humor. You know, the leader of the free world and you can joke a little bit. It’s a lesson for all of us. I try to take my lessons from him but I don’t have any for him.

If you were in the White House, you would be a year from leaving office and starting to think about your legacy. What is the legacy of the Ayers Administration so far?

If you just look at the numbers, the fact we’ve doubled domestic students of color and doubled international students in five years I think is a remarkable accomplishment of the university as a whole. I think it has changed the fabric of life here. It has changed our sense of what’s possible. The fact that by making us more inclusive, we are increasingly attractive to people of all backgrounds around the country.

So where are we headed?

What we need to remember as we come upon our centennial, the University of Richmond as we know it now is actually a very young institution, and we can get better in every way. We’ve undergone some pretty serious changes in the last decade, and I think in many ways, pausing for a moment to take stock and figure out what we want to do is appropriate. After the campaign this year, the following year should be a time for reflection with the centennial. I don’t think we want to give up anything we’ve accomplished these last five years.

“My challenge is to change the things that could be changed without ruining the things that are already great.”
years. I don’t think this place will ever be less diverse. I don’t think it will ever be less ambitious. I don’t think it will ever be less devoted to undergrad education. However, we can accomplish each of those things more effectively.

**What are UR Summer Fellowships and why do we need them?**

Their key aspect is this: By establishing a common mechanism by which students can be aware of all the opportunities they have before them. Some that they will create for themselves, others that the university helps find for them others through connections with alumni and parents and neighbors here, some that the faculty are creating, some that are brought to us by the organizations themselves. The idea is to find the commonality that allows people to create the education that they want.

**Why does need-blind admission matter?**

Need blind admissions ensure that a student’s ability to pay has no bearing whatsoever on their ability to gain acceptance and attend Richmond. Currently, just 57 schools in the world can offer this and the recession still threatens to reduce that number.

**Why is this the University's funding priority right now?**

It’s clear that if our students are going to be able to take advantage of this great education they have, they need to be able to show what they can do in the world.

**What happens if unpaid internships—thanks to all the lawsuits—become a thing of the past?**

It’s a moving target. It’s an unrestricted endowment that responds to changing circumstances. If the worst thing that happened is our student internships focused towards academic research or non profits, that’s ok. They are flexible enough that even if people get paid, they can still get a summer fellowship. We’re trying to put as few restrictions around it as possible.

**History of Diversity**

- 1914 - Westhampton College founded, all classes are separate from men
- 1930 - Students allowed to have co-ed classes
- 1968 - Barry Greene becomes the first African American student to live on campus
- 2002 - Men and women start living in co-ed dorms

**Changing Demographics**

- 2000-2001 12% U.S. students of color 5% International
- 2012-2013 23% U.S. students of color, 8% International

**State of Our Finances**

- 2001- $1.05 billion endowment
- 2012- $1.87 billion endowment

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“The idea is to find the commonality that allows people to create the education that they want.”

"We’re now 100% off coal,” said President Ayers. This comes after student protests against the use of coal in 2010. “It’s young people’s jobs to think about what could be better.”

**JOHN McAULIFF**