

**BOARD OF VISITORS
MINUTES OF THE EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE**

September 12, 2023

Present: Mr. Hugh M. Fain III '80, Committee Chair
Mr. Thomas E. Gottwald '83
Ms. Meaghan Mobbs
Ms. Nancy Phillips
Mr. Damon Williams '90

Others: Col. Jeff Boobar '86, Finance and Support
Mr. Noah Campbell '24, S5 Captain
Brig. Gen. Dallas Clark '99, Deputy Superintendent FAS
Lt. Col. Michelle Ellwood, Communications and Marketing
Col. Keith Gibson '77, VMI Museums System
Ms. Amy Goetz, Alumni Agencies
Col. Kim Parker, Government Relations Officer
Col. Bill Wyatt, Communications and Marketing
Col. John Young, Chief of Staff
Mr. Dan Phelps

The meeting was called to order at 1603 hours in the Smith Hall boardroom by Mr. Fain.

1. Review Charter:

Mr. Fain asked the committee to review the charter to be reminded of the committee's responsibilities before moving forward in discussion.

2. Review of the April 2023 External Relations Committee Minutes:

Mr. Gottwald moved the minutes be approved as presented, the motion was seconded by Ms. Mobbs and approved by the committee.

3. Reports:

Cadet S5 Report.

- (1) Mr. Campbell, S5 captain for the 23-24 academic year, is a biology major with a goal to go to medical school.

- (2) The S5 staff supported Matriculation Day with move-in support, standing watch over the Matriculation Book, taking photos and videos, and attending the Parents Council social the night before to answer questions for matriculants and their parents.
- (3) His staff will support the admissions open houses – 3 in fall and 3 in spring. Virtual open houses are also supported, allowing people who cannot come to Lexington for whatever reason to still have an open house experience.
- (4) Additional S5 activities have included tours for new faculty and the convocation speaker, as well as ushers during the parades, and they will soon be preparing for holiday suppers for the Corps, Founders Day activities.

Government Relations Report.

- (1) Col. Kim Parker highlighted items in the McGuire Woods Consulting Report. There are many seats open in the General Assembly for the upcoming November elections, following the redistricting, with many due to retiring and others either not seeking re-election or running for other positions. This is a tremendous loss of Institutional memory developed over the years. There will be a lot of meetings to educate those elected in the coming months.
- (2) Parker touched on the six-year plan which has been presented to the OpSix committee. Fain participated in the presentation, which was well-prepared with many contributions from across post, and has received positive input so far.
- (3) The special session budget for FY24 included an additional \$832,000 in affordable access funding, an additional \$125,000 in financial aid, and additional 2% compensation. We also received detail planning for three capital funding projects.
- (4) Fall visits will focus on those in relatively safe races before the November elections. As elections wrap up, there will be more visits before the session. Cadets often help with these visits.
- (5) The Legislative Reception is being planned for early 2024 at the Library of Virginia.
- (6) Regarding funding priorities, Parker shared the Institute's plans following the guide of the new Strategic Plan. The Institute will review the governor's budget in December to determine how things move forward.
- (7) Parker shared key dates of the General Assembly, starting on Jan. 10. It is a 60-day session. The veto session will be in the spring.
- (8) The Pell Grant initiative funding was a team effort garnering \$3.8 million over four years. This will allow positions like the strategic enrollment manager position, as well as support for those who may not otherwise be able to visit the Institute for open houses, among other support initiatives.
- (9) Col. Jeff Boobar presented local government updates. He arrived in May and has been using the past few months to conduct introductory meetings with city and county leaders.

- (10) VMI representatives took part in two dedications over the summer of projects VMI helped fund. The first was a Lexington Fire Department tower fire truck. The other project was the Main Street Lexington Gateway Triangle Garden.
- (11) Other summer events VMI was a part of included being a sponsor of the Buena Vista 4th of July event, VMI hosted the Lexington Police Department summer camp participants, VMI's athletic department hosted a free movie night in Foster Stadium for matriculants and their families as well as families throughout the community. The city manager and police chief attended matriculation.
- (12) VMI is working with Rockbridge County High School on their expansion of their technology school. They have asked VMI to give up part of our right-of-way for the project. We are in negotiations to finalize this approval.
- (13) Upcoming, Boobar shared that he's meeting with city leaders on the renovation of the Jordans Point boat launch. Also, VMI is working with VDOT as they will be preparing bike lanes on Route 11/Main Street through post, starting at the bridge coming into town until the Aquatic Center. This is a big project to kick off in 2024 that will impact VMI parking and activities.

Communications and Marketing Report.

- (1) Col. Wyatt emphasized the importance of the board seeing and supporting the need for additional resources to support larger projects or unexpected items, while the team manages the day-to-day items.
- (2) Looking back over the last academic year, Wyatt shared that news coverage volume was up 23.7%. Positive coverage was up 7% and negative coverage up 2%. Between 80 and 90% of all news items would fall under positive or neutral categories.
- (3) Regarding royalties, VMI is on par with last year. There are opportunities for social media to push merchandise and build that revenue. There was a hit in this area due to COVID - people were not at events to purchase licensed merchandise.
- (4) The communications and marketing team gained new members and has been developing a great deal of content. There were 495 pieces of content created for digital communications in the last year, and there is a focus on driving more people to the website using search engine optimization. A videographer and social media coordinator are creating and posting very engaging content. Tens of thousands of photos were taken through the year, and more than 120 news stories written.
- (5) New users have increased on the website - some pages up more than 200% - and many modifications have been made to the site to help with navigation and usability of the site.
- (6) Freedom of Information Act requests have almost doubled in two years - a growing area of responsibility. Nearly 2/3 are completed at no charge.
- (7) Looking ahead, there continues to be a focus on: brand reputation, modernizing the website, internal communications, and public relations strategy and outreach.

- (8) Wyatt touched on challenges. Technology and resources are lacking to be able to do what is possible. A new content management system is needed - the current web CMS does not do what is needed it to do to get an updated, modern website.
- (9) We do not have a budget for sustained advertising for brand reputation. This would compliment what is done for new cadet recruiting.
- (10) Proactive relations is also a large focus - this has been a big improvement over the last three years. Relationship building with local and regional news outlets has been occurring.
- (11) A discussion followed, led by Mr. Gottwald, on putting more focus on communicating directly to alumni, a key audience and recruiters of new cadets.

Alumni Agencies Report.

- (1) Amy Goetz shared that Alumni Agencies has created a multi-level print marketing and digital marketing communications plan. Last year, \$100,000 was spent working with PR firms on digital communications, including branded content stories with the Richmond Times-Dispatch. A call-to-action website was created specifically for alumni.
- (2) Their publications reach 15,000 unique alumni - which is 61% of alumni, and a wide variety of ages. Videos are being used more frequently now, too, including the Corps Connects and Why I VMI series.
- (3) IP address-targeted ads are also a strategy being used.

VMI Museums System Report.

- (1) Col. Keith Gibson shared a photo of a Brother Rat doll, which appeared in the movie "Brother Rat" in 1938. There are several in the museum collection, and they could soon be replicated to be available in the museum store.
- (2) Gov. Youngkin's wife has several Virginia artist and culture displays in the Governor's mansion, and there are a few on display from the VMI Museum System.
- (3) There has been a lot of recent cadet involvement with the museums. One cadet received an internship at the National Museum of the Marine Corps from his experience with VMI. Daniel Walker was the Scholar-In-Residence at the Virginia Museum of the Civil War this summer.
- (4) On-post tours took place during the summer – a 12-month program. It was a team of 8 supporting cadet-in-charge Grace Wagner.
- (5) An intern from Clark University is helping with research to help get more museum information on the website, including about the people featured on the plaques across post and in the Hall of Valor. This will be an ongoing project with cadets.
- (6) The Superintendent's Quarters exhibits were completed. These include several original paintings, featuring a member of the faculty who did a painting of Natural Bridge.

- (7) Regarding staffing, Gibson shared that Betty Skillman, store manager of the VMI museum, retired, and the assistant site director at the Jackson House Museum will be leaving to take on a new role in Texas.
- (8) Gibson reminded those in attendance that the VMI Museum System was one of the first museums in the country to be professionally accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. Only 1,099 out of 33,000 museums in the U.S. are professionally accredited.

Additional Business.

Mr. Dan Phelps made public comment during this committee meeting regarding war reenactments and opportunities for VMI or the Museum System to be part of upcoming events.

The meeting then went into closed session at 1752 by motions of Mobbs and Williams. The committee was back in open session at 1810.

There were two motions that came out of closed session.

- (1) In response to the Governor's request, the committee accepted to present to the full Board of Visitors the approval of the Confederate Memorial currently located in Arlington National Cemetery to be moved to New Market Battlefield State Historical Park. The motion was moved by Mobbs, seconded by Williams.
- (2) The committee accepted the motion to create a New Market Medal Award Selection Committee. This motion was moved by Williams, seconded by Mobbs, to be brought to the full Board of Visitors.

The meeting adjourned at 1812.