

Charles Steger
May 6, 2018

Charles Steger and I became friends in the early 1990s in Richmond as we roamed the General Assembly Building's corridors in search of backing for Virginia's colleges and universities. In those days, Charles and two or three others represented Virginia Tech there and at SCHEV. Working on behalf of Presidents McComas and then Torgerson, Charles pursued alliances with U.Va., with the VCCS, and no doubt with others to provide services distant from Blacksburg and Charlottesville – for joint extension and continuing education centers in Falls Church and Abingdon and Virginia Beach, for shared high speed computing, for Virginia's interests in the Jefferson Laboratory in Newport News. His collaborations with both of his predecessors in the position of President was seamless. He worked without claiming personal credit for projects that benefited Virginia Tech, and U.Va., and higher education generally.

New presidents inevitably bring their own priorities to that position. Following 2000 when Charles became president, Virginia Tech evolved in dramatic ways toward modern extended education and outreach programs, both of which belong to Virginia Tech because it is a Land Grant University. These new and expanded ventures brought Virginia Tech to new varieties of international prominence in fields of research that have turned out to be tremendously valuable to Virginia. Bioinformatics and Information Technology are perhaps best known among these, but these two very prominent programs are two among several that belong in special ways to the Steger years.

In addition to attracting attention in the U.S., Virginia Tech's willingness to collaborate and share with others attracted international attention. Charles inevitably credited others with Virginia Tech's growing international reputation. Credit of that kind is always due in universities, but Virginia Tech's centers in Switzerland and in Northern Virginia reflect Charles' temperament in many ways. He was a prominent planner and Virginia Tech's Architecture dean before he became a Vice President. Both of these campuses include centers for advanced research and study in Architecture, including planning. At the same time, Charles sought international partners for Virginia Tech's other fields of study. In manufacturing engineering and processes, outgrowths or extensions of the university's ongoing work in Mechanical Engineering and Systems Engineering,

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Charles faced challenges and a major catastrophe during his years as President. Beginning in 1990, state financial support for all of Virginia's public colleges and universities declined dramatically. Despite uncommon efforts on the parts of several of our Governors and many leaders in the House of Delegates and the Senate, that support has not returned to its pre-1990 levels. Virginia Tech has had to find new funding for many of its most important programs. Serving first as Vice President for Development and University Relations, then as President, Charles shaped and led Virginia Tech's first major capital funds campaign. As a fund raiser, he has had few equals. His personal modesty combined with his uncommon commitments to the common good at Virginia Tech and in the state and nation positioned him to be powerfully persuasive, and he has understood also the necessity to demonstrate the value of personal gifts to Virginia Tech generally.

The catastrophe came on April 16, 2007, when a lone gunman murdered 32 people and injured another 17 in the university's core student residential and academic spaces. Charles's response was immediate and human. Dominion CEO Tom Ferrall, then U.Va.'s Rector, and our wives were on Virginia Tech's campus the following day when students, university employees, and state and national leaders, including President Bush, convened in the field house and the stadium to mourn these deaths and injuries and to support one another. We sat with the Farrells among students high up in the stadium during this event, and in a sense we added our grief to theirs. Yet on that day we heard grieving students cheer for their President, for Charles Steger, both when he began to speak, and much louder and longer when he finished. On that day for grieving, he gave his students ways to believe in their common future.

Not many of the hundreds of leaders who have led American universities in modern times have influenced their institutions as powerfully as Charles Steger influenced Virginia Tech, or as gently and wisely. None has ever faced disaster of the kind that came on April 16, 2007. Through it all, Charles imagined a future of service and achievement, and led Virginia Tech toward it.

John Casteen, Charles Steger and I became friends in the early 1990s in Richmond as we roamed the General Assembly Building's corridors in search of backing for Virginia's colleges and universities. In those days, Charles and two or three others represented Virginia Tech there and at SCHEV. Working on behalf of Presidents McComas and then Torgerson, Charles pursued alliances with U.Va., with the VCCS, and no doubt with others to provide services distant from Blacksburg and Charlottesville – for joint extension and continuing education centers in Falls Church and Abingdon and Virginia Beach, for shared high speed computing, for Virginia's interests in the Jefferson Laboratory in Newport News. His collaborations with both of his predecessors in the position of President was seamless. He worked without claiming personal credit for projects that benefited Virginia Tech, and U.Va., and higher education generally.

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Not many of the hundreds of leaders who have led American universities in modern times have influenced their institutions as powerfully as Charles Steger influenced Virginia Tech. Fewer still have led their institutions as wisely as Charles led Virginia Tech toward excellence in serving the women and men who count on higher education to shape their jobs, their lives, their own and their children's futures. None has faced disaster of the kind that came on April 16, 2007. Charles imagined the future on the largest scales, and led Virginia Tech toward it.