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Cash cows, caps and gowns, and greed

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But you Thomas Jefferson You could not be so still, You could not bear the weight of stone
On the quiet hill You could not know your green grown peace Nor hold your folded hand If
you could see your new world now, Your new sweet land. - Archibald MacLeish

Among the regular solicitations I receive from the Christian Children's Fund, Doctors Without Borders, the Southern Poverty Law Center and other charitable institutions, I have for decades received super-slick fund-raising brochures from my alma mater, the University of Virginia School of Law.

For decades I have thought, incredulously, that these people need money less than anybody I know. Now I read that the University of Virginia has launched a \$3 billion campaign to finance, among other ostensible essentials, a \$400,000 salary package for its president, John T. Casteen III ("The perks of being a college president," *The Virginian-Pilot*, Oct. 4).

Considered in a vacuum, one cannot begrudge Mr. Casteen a dime. He doubtless would not occupy his post were he not an exceedingly honorable, competent and well-connected chief executive. From a cost-benefit perspective, he is probably a bargain, even at that price, and his salary is probably in line with that paid to presidents of other prestigious universities.

Further, it is hard to argue with success. U.Va. has, over time, contributed far more than its proportionate share to the leadership of industry, government, science and the arts. Long and illustrious is the roll of senators, governors, jurists, scientists, authors and artists who sport the tacky blue and orange at the elegant gatherings of the well-to-do.

Reassuring as all that may be, in a world of real want and real need, where more than 10 percent of Virginians live in poverty and 100,000 children are without health insurance, there is something unsettling about paying a public school official \$400,000 a year while at the same time panhandling for billions. It is hard to say which is most jarring: paying a \$400,000 salary to a state school official, campaigning for billions to pay school bills or doing both at once with a perfectly straight face.

Thomas Jefferson, who was paid zero dollars for founding "The University," once noted the only prerequisite to a good education is a good library and someone to tell the student in which order

to read the books. Admittedly, something beyond four years of study hall is necessary to persuade 21st century pupils to endure four years of 21st century education. Even so, considering society's competing demands on our scarce resources, it boggles the mind to think that the accoutrements of academia needed to motivate and educate the most privileged members of our society justify budgets in the billions at a single university.

As to the perks of the presidency, one would think the honor alone of being president of U.Va. would be worth something. Apparently, not enough.

The university's mission statement proclaims that the central purpose of U.Va. is to enrich the mind. The example set by Casteen's salary suggests a mission to enrich something else.

The complicity of the alumni and Board of Visitors in this subtle corruption of the school's stated mission fosters values at cross purposes with the egalitarianism that marked the institution's origins. Too many of our most promising high school graduates already enter places like U.Va. bent only on learning to make the world a better place and leave intent only on making money hand over fist.

Renaissance writer Francesco Petrarco, after studying law for seven years, soon thereafter swapped a lucrative law practice for the lowly writer's life, because he "could not face making a merchandise of my mind." He later became poet laureate of Rome, his works rivaling in stature St. Augustine's. Not a likely career track for one inculcated with the values in evidence at Mr. Jefferson's University today.

Those who enter a university - especially U.Va. - walk on hallowed ground! . The University of Virginia should comport itself as a temple of enlightenment and egalitarianism, not as a cash cow cloaked in cap and gown.

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other opinions

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