June 9, 2020

Letter to the Graduating class of 2024

Many congratulations for matriculating at the University of Virginia for your undergraduate college education! Given the strength of your accomplishments, I have no doubt that you had other choices and so I thank you for choosing us to accompany you on your journey to your next destination four years from now. That next destination would likely be a career or further preparation for a career.

To that end, the Office of African-American Affairs is uniquely equipped with a staff of Deans and others that can support you all the way. We have between us at least one hundred years of experience in advising and re-advising students in College for Graduate and Professional Schools like Medicine, Engineering, Law, Management, Public Policy and Education, among others. This next segment of your career preparation requires a staff of Deans who have the dexterity to calibrate the level of engagement you need in the form of academic and non-academic advising, mentoring, coaching, or sponsoring of students in order to get to the next tier of their career preparation. In any case, this calibration of engagements requires relationship building with us from the very start.

Why? I will emphasize three very realistic reasons. First, no matter how successful you are, and have been, you will require strong letters of recommendation for acceptance into graduate and professional schools and competitive workplaces. Strong letters depend on strong and purposeful relationships. Readers on job hiring committees, graduate and professional school admissions committees know how well the writers of these letters know you and have worked with you. This note of thanks from a recent graduate is a product of such a relationship:

Dear Dean Apprey,

I hope you are well and enjoying the start of the New Year!

I hope things are going well back in Charlottesville and that there is a ton of excitement about this upcoming semester. As I reflected on this past year, I continuously thought about what a special place and experience my time at UVA was. Because of this, I wished to quickly update you on my 1L experience thus far at Columbia.

It still amazes me that I am standing in the midst of my dream - attending law school to learn the fundamentals of legal advocacy to help those who are typically inadequately represented in our system. Since August, my knowledge of the law, my critical analysis skills, and writing have improved tremendously. While this is proving to be the most challenging academic experience I’ve had, I am grateful to UVA for preparing me as well as it did for such an experience. This past semester I completed Torts, Constitutional Law, Civil Procedure, and a legal writing course. In addition, I was selected to participate on Columbia’s moot court team that will compete at the Regional and National Thurgood Marshall Competition this spring. I am excited to
begin the Spring Semester in the coming weeks. I will be sure to update you as I continue on this journey.

As we prepare to submit summer internship applications, I have my eyes set on various organizations that would allow me to gain hands on experience in litigation. This includes the NAACP LDF and the ACLU, among others. While I will be using one my current professors and a previous employer as references, my career advisor suggested that I also include an individual from my undergraduate institution. This would not require anything outside of me providing a phone number and email address where you could be easily reached. If it not too much, would you be willing to serve as a reference? You have been a tremendous influence and help to me over these years and I am truly grateful for all of your assistance.

I wish you a wonderful and fulfilling new year! I hope to hear from you soon!

Sincerely,
R.K. (emphasis added)

University of Virginia, Class of 2019
Frank Batten School for Leadership & Public Policy

She received a strong letter of recommendation and replied as follows:

Dear Dean Apprey,

The current pandemic and its implications brought you to my mind and I wished to send well wishes for you and your family - I pray you all remain safe and healthy during this time. I'm sure the consequences of this crisis has brought many challenges for you and the OAAA team. However, I firmly believe no one is more equipped and prepared to tackle them than you.

Furthermore, I wish to sincerely thank you for the reference you provided on my behalf to the ACLU of Virginia. I'm happy to inform you that I received and accepted the summer internship with their office (although the bulk of my summer will likely be remote). Unbeknownst to me at the time, that decision would be a tremendous one - it allows me to remain home for the remainder of the semester and stay away from NYC until the fall. Hopefully in that time, the precautions being taken by our states and localities will flatten the curve and allow us to return to some normalcy.

I'll continue to keep you in my thoughts throughout this experience.

Sincerely,
RK....
University of Virginia, Class of 2019
Frank Batten School for Leadership & Public Policy

You can see that there is a professional relationship that will go on till she no longer needs us. We have countless letters like this. I offer you this because it is the most recent. There is a second and very good reason for starting college with excellent advising and mentoring relationships. My message in this regard is always the same. That message is of timeless value.
It says: “Finis origine pendet.” It translates literally from Latin as “The end hangs upon the beginning.” Yes, the end depends upon the beginning. How you start has a lot to do with how you end. The implication of this precept is that you must take the time to think about your course selections. To that end, avoid mistakes like I wanted to challenge myself. Avoid taking Arabic, Chemistry and Calculus in the first semester of college. There is not enough time in the day to master such self-imposed obstacle course of needless hardship. Here is another big error: taking Economics without having taken Calculus first, then Statistics second. This way, you get Quantity and Change in multiple dimensions, Quantity and Chance, before making Predictions in Economics. I want to over-communicate to you on this issue of thoughtful course selections and the conduct of good study habits, among others, because those who have not followed them have created needless hardship for themselves in getting to their destinations.

In order to anchor this notion of thoughtful course selections, the Office of African-American Affairs will hold a 2-day Virtual Summer Orientation on June 30th and July 1st. You will receive a letter from Associate Dean Kimberley C. Bassett inviting you to this Orientation. It is separate from any other information you will receive from any other sector of the University. We have in mind, as a strategic objective, students that start so well that they can position themselves for such awards as Echols Scholars, Intermediate Honors, Rhodes and Fulbright scholarships, entry into competitive majors that require high GPAs, among other merit awards that we can talk about when you come. So think, and look ahead.

If you do not start strong, use us to recover. Here is a testimony to this advice. One such student who used us to recover wrote as follows:

Hi Dean Apprey!

I hope you and your family are doing well and staying safe during this pandemic! I apologize for not checking up with you and updating you on everything. But I am finally done with undergrad at UVA and I cannot express to you how much I am truly thankful for the help you’ve given me. My first year was tough and I’m glad I found you as a resource. Thank you for getting me back on track and introducing me to Dean Grimes. The both of you really motivated me to do well and to not fall back into that dark hole I was in. I will forever be grateful.

I wish you success in your future endeavors and I look forward to your response!

A.A. (Emphasis added).

When you start strong and finish well, you may just want to share your joys with us. Witness the following letter from a student who simply wanted to stay in touch:

From: J.X.A.
Sent: Wednesday, May 20, 2020 12:42 PM
To: Apprey, Maurice (ma9h) <ma9h@virginia.edu>
Subject: Checking In- Alumna Update

Hi Dean Apprey,

I hope you are doing well. My name is J. A. and I graduated from the University of Virginia in 2017. I’m emailing you to thank you for all of the advice and support you have given me.
throughout the years. With your help, I was able to get admitted to George Mason University and I'm currently pursuing a Dual Masters in Conflict Resolution and Social Work. I just finished my first year of the program with a 4.0 GPA and I wouldn't have been able to accomplish this without all of your advice.

During this past year, I had the opportunity to study the diagnoses in the DSM-5, use various assessment tools and interventions while working with clients for one-on-one and group sessions, analyze conflict resolution theories like basic human needs and realism, and engage in negotiation and interactive problem-solving workshops. Thank you again for everything, I'm truly grateful. I hope you are staying safe and well during this pandemic.

Warmest regards,
--
J.X.A.

When she completes her joint program, she plans to get her doctorate at Columbia University or at George Mason's University in conflict resolution so that, ultimately, she can work with a range of clients from individual to fractured communities, at home and/or abroad.

The third area of relationship building is with us as Deans and with each other as fellow students.

In the first year, make optimal use of the Peer Advisor Program where second year students and others assist with facilitating entry and retention. Associate Dean Kimberley Bassett is the Director and the Dean for the first year. In addition, she and I do pre-health advising.

When you get to the second year, consider joining the Faculty Mentoring Program where a student is paired with a Faculty member for a year to continue building professional relationships that can shape your future. Associate Dean Antoinette Thomas is the Director of the GradSTAR program and the Dean of the Second year. She is also an Associate Professor in the Curry School of Development and Human Studies.

Consider joining groups like the Black Male Initiative (BMI), Black College Women (BCW) and Project RISE (Resolving Issues through Support and Education). If you take advantage of these opportunities, you will become well-rounded and be able to handle work-like balance, meaningful friendships, and meaningful family relationships, among others. Associate Dean Michael Mason is the Director of the Luther P. Jackson Black Cultural Center, the third year Dean, and a therapist at Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS).

I will collaborate with our Associate Deans as necessary, to provide high impact strategic direction for the Office of African-American Affairs (OAAA) and serve as the Dean of the fourth year.

As you navigate your way through the University, I want you to think about these rubrics in incremental ways. These four will be used by committees of graduate and professional schools and competitive work places to assess your suitability for acceptance into their midst. From now on, please do not say, I want to help people. Rather, follow this well-tested aggregate of
expectations and fulfils. It is not a questionnaire but guideposts for us to plan together for the next four years to get you to the “Promised Land,” as it were. Accordingly,

1. They will want to know what value-added assets you will bring to their fold as a professional teacher, engineer, physician, attorney, amongst other careers. What drives you? How long have you sustained that drive? *(Motivation).*
2. They will want to know if you have had relevant internships, research, clinical, or other work experience *(Exposure).*
3. They will want to know how your educational preparation will support your chosen career. Can you do disciplined and sustained work? *(Academic Preparation).*
4. Finally, they will want to know what leadership, personal and social skills and competencies you will bring to the work place, laboratory or clinic. Can you think and work together with people? *(Human skills).*


The Deans of the Office have perfected how to help you to use this schematic framework, and others, to chart your journey. You will need these frameworks to write your personal statements and position yourself for interviews. We will use them to write you strong letters where we have had excellent working relationships with you.

Finally, please join me in thinking kind thoughts for families who are enduring loss and devastation due to the pandemic. Let us join together as we strive to build civil and racially just society. *Most of all, to the graduating class of 2024, let us continue to work together, staying focused and hopeful along the way and in ways that would enable us to do our best work in the midst of crises.* Our reward? Resilience, for life.

Many blessings on your journey.

*Maurice Apprey*

Maurice Apprey, PhD, DM, FIPA, Professor of Psychiatry, Member, Academy of Distinguished Educators, School of Medicine, Dean of African-American Affairs, Associate Vice-President of Student Affairs, University of Virginia, Training and Supervising Psychoanalyst, International Psychoanalytic Association.