

VA. COLLEGIANS WILL LOBBY FOR STUDENTS

The Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk)

October 4, 1994, Tuesday,

FINAL EDITION

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Section: LOCAL,

Length: 445 words

Byline: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Body

Students from several state-supported colleges are creating a statewide organization to lobby Virginia politicians on behalf of student issues.

"We want to make sure students are involved in setting higher education policy in Virginia," said Martin Haley, a senior at George Mason University in Fairfax and an organizer of the lobbying group.

"There's a lot that's done without our input, and yet we're the customers of the system."

The group is still in its infancy. Students from eight state-supported schools met at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville in September to lay the groundwork. They are scheduled to meet again at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg on Oct. 15 and 16.

The group's primary goal would be to maintain or increase state spending on education, Haley said, but it could take up other issues. Its activities will include a voter-registration campaign.

"This would be in similar fashion to a League of Women Voters for students in Virginia," Haley said. "We feel like the students of Virginia are very unrepresented in the political system. We want to ensure that they vote in Virginia general elections and make sure their vote is an educated one."

The group also plans to conduct traditional lobbying, like writing letters and calling legislators. Like other lobbyists, the students will take advantage of connections, soliciting support from their parents and from the owners of businesses where they work during summer vacations.

"We can identify those students who are from specific districts," said Greg Werkheiser, president of the Student Association at William and Mary. "With each student comes a family with a potential of three or four votes."

Werkheiser acknowledged that colleges and universities already have plenty of people working on their behalf, including alumni and school presidents. But while others may have more money than students, he said, "We've got more time and, arguably, more energy."

For the time being, the new group is calling itself the Virginia Student Coalition, the name used by a group of student government leaders who joined forces to fight cuts in the state's higher education budget last year.

The group will likely adopt a new name once it receives nonprofit status, Haley said.

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The schools represented at the group's first meeting included U.Va., George Mason, William and Mary, Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Radford University in Radford, James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond and Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg.

Eventually, Haley said, the group hopes to include students from every state-supported college in Virginia.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: LOBBYING (95%); POLITICS (90%); PUBLIC POLICY (90%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (90%); VOTERS & VOTING (90%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (89%); COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (89%); EDUCATION FUNDING (89%); GOVERNMENT BUDGETS (89%); STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS (89%); EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES (79%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (79%); CIVIC & SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS (78%); ELECTIONS (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS (78%); PUBLIC OFFICIALS (78%); TALKS & MEETINGS (74%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (73%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (73%); VOTER REGISTRATION (67%)

Company: UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA (55%)

Organization: UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA (57%); UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA (57%)

Industry: COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (89%); GOVERNMENT BUDGETS (89%); EDUCATIONAL SERVICES (79%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (79%); BUDGETS (73%)

Geographic: RICHMOND, VA, USA (79%); WILLIAMSBURG, VA, USA (79%); VIRGINIA, USA (95%)

Load-Date: October 5, 1994

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