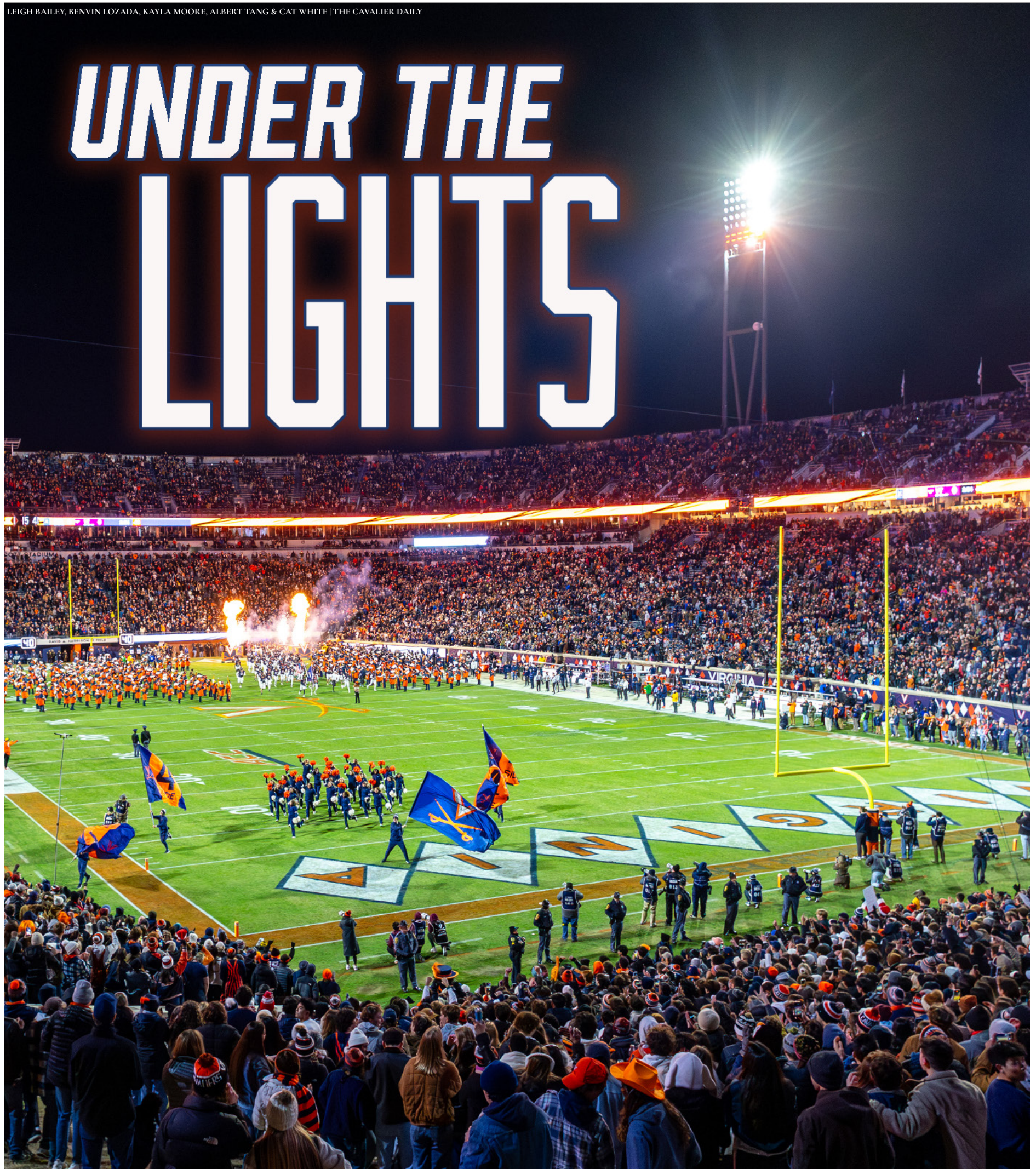


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LEIGH BAILEY, BENVIN LOZADA, KAYLA MOORE, ALBERT TANG & CAT WHITE | THE CAVALIER DAILY



The Year in Brief

CD Staff Writers

Board of Visitors votes to dissolve Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The full Board of Visitors convened on Friday to review resolutions which had been passed within individual committees prior to the full Board meeting, including a resolution passed in closed session to dissolve the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at the University, which the full Board also approved. The Board also discussed the University's test-optional policy for undergraduate admissions and commended members who were leaving their positions.

One resolution passed during the full Board's meeting was not discussed in open session prior to its approval. This resolution focuses on compliance with President Donald Trump's executive order, signed Jan. 21, to end DEI efforts within the public sector. The resolution requires that the University officially dissolve the Office of DEI and Community Partnerships.

Language in the resolution also states that the University continues to value diversity and to welcome students from all backgrounds.

3.9

6.27

7.1

10.22

11.4

11.14

UVa. President Jim Ryan announces his resignation

University President Jim Ryan announced his resignation to the University community Friday afternoon, following the Board of Visitors' acceptance of his resignation Thursday. In his statement, sent via email to the entire community, Ryan said that choosing to remain in his position would threaten employees' jobs, researchers' funding and students' financial aid and visa access.

"I am inclined to fight for what I believe in, and I believe deeply in this University. But I cannot make a unilateral decision to fight the federal government in order to save my own job," Ryan wrote.

This resignation follows an ongoing investigation conducted by the Department of Justice into Ryan's leadership and what they viewed as Ryan's refusal to dismantle Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies at the University. The New York Times reported Thursday that department officials had demanded Ryan's resignation in private negotiations with the Board of Visitors.

Letters from DOJ reveal threats to UVa. over admissions policies, Ryan's leadership

Between April 11 and June 17, the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division sent seven letters to University officials, according to documents obtained by The Cavalier Daily through a Freedom of information Act request.

In these letters, the Justice Department sought confirmation that the University had removed affirmative action from its admissions policies and had ended Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives. Some letters also alleged that the University had failed to protect students against anti-semitism. The letters did not confirm whether or not the Justice Department's demands had been met.

The documents confirm that the Justice Department alleged that then-University President Jim Ryan and other members of the University were violating federal law and were impeding their efforts to obtain documentation of certain policies. They threatened that if the University were to continue down this path, federal financial assistance could be suspended or terminated and civil action may be pursued.

Justice Department reaches deal, suspends remaining investigations into UVa

The Justice Department suspended the remaining five investigations into the University in exchange for an acknowledgment to follow all civil rights laws, Interim University President Paul Mahoney announced Wednesday in an email to the community. Mahoney said that the investigations were suspended as a result of an agreement with the Justice Department which the University and the Department came to after months of discussions.

The University is the first public institution to reach an agreement of this nature with the Justice Department. In his email to the community, Mahoney said that he believes this agreement is the University's best option in moving forward from the Justice Department's investigations.

The agreement will last until Dec. 31, 2028 — upon that date, if the University has complied with the agreement's terms, the Justice Department will close the remaining investigations. However, it says that nothing in the agreement prevents the United States from opening new investigations or conducting compliance reviews.

Democrats win big in Virginia, sweeping statewide races

Abigail Spanberger will be the next governor of Virginia — the first woman to serve in that role — after she defeated Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears in a resounding victory. Spanberger led in pre-election polls throughout the campaign, but most polls did not have her margin as large as the 15-point margin where it ended up.

Democrats also won the other two statewide races Tuesday night. State Sen. Ghazala Hashmi won the lieutenant governor's race, defeating John Reid, and becoming the first Muslim woman elected to any statewide office in U.S. history. Former Del. Jay Jones also won the attorney general's race despite his violent text message controversy.

The 2025 elections also saw high turnout by University students. The Cavalier Daily tracked turnout at student polling places throughout the day, and reported that turnout was only slightly tracking behind the 2024 presidential race. Presidential races in Virginia typically have significantly higher turnout than gubernatorial races.

Ryan and Sheridan provide full accounts of Ryan's resignation. They differ significantly

Former University President Jim Ryan and Board of Visitors Rector Rachel Sheridan have each provided, for the first time since Ryan's resignation, full accounts of the circumstances which led to Ryan's decision to step down.

Sheridan sent a letter to the Faculty Senate Thursday afternoon providing a detailed timeline of discussions with the Justice Department before Ryan's resignation. Ryan, in response, sent a letter to the Faculty Senate Friday which shared an account he wrote this summer of the circumstances leading to his resignation.

The letters follow months of tensions between the Board and the Faculty Senate over Ryan's resignation and several resolutions by the Faculty Senate calling on Sheridan and Vice Rector Porter Wilkinson to speak directly to senators about the circumstances surrounding investigations by the Justice Department and Ryan's subsequent departure

Students react to Sheridan's and Ryan's letters

University students say they feel Ryan's letter released Nov. 14 reveals the Board of Visitors lacked transparency about the events leading to Ryan's resignation

Ingrid Gay and Lauren Seeliger | Staff Writers

Since the abrupt resignation of former University President Jim Ryan June 27, many members of the University have been left with questions about what exactly led to Ryan's departure. Two letters sent by Board of Visitors Rector Rachel Sheridan and Ryan Nov. 13 and 14, respectively, to the Faculty Senate outlined their perspective of the events leading to the day he resigned.

Ryan's letter was in response to Sheridan's and differed greatly from what she had written the day prior — Ryan said Board members told him the Justice Department was demanding his resignation while Sheridan wrote in her letter that this was not the case.

The Cavalier Daily interviewed seven University students who reported feeling as though Ryan's letter revealed a more reliable account of the events leading to his resignation than Sheridan's, which these students said left many questions unanswered.

Fourth-year College student Matt Marsden said that despite the vast differences between their two letters, he was thankful that both Sheridan and Ryan each released their own perspectives.

"I appreciate that recently, we've heard from both the Board and from Jim Ryan, which has provided a lot of context for the events over the summer, but there are definitely some very significant disparities between what Rector Sheridan has said and what Jim Ryan said," Marsden said.

Overwhelmingly, students said Ryan's letter revealed an unacceptable level of federal overreach into the University during the months leading up to his resignation.

Ryan wrote in his letter that the Justice Department pressured him to resign — he heard from Board Member Paul Manning in the 10 days before he resigned that if he did not do so, the Justice Department would "bleed UVa. white."

Third-year College student Jaden Kline said Ryan's letter reinforced what he already believed to be a poor removal of Ryan. Kline reported being concerned with what he viewed as an act of political overreach.

"As a student, I was disappointed and disturbed by how Ryan's resignation unfolded. Reading the letter just kind of proved it further," Kline said. "It didn't feel like a thoughtful transition or a decision that was made with the best interest of students in mind. It felt like political pressure won out over University values."

Schaefer shared the same sentiments as Kline, and said her worries lie with the disregard of state autonomy and powers.

"It is really partisan and really annoying that the federal government



KAYLA MOORE | THE CAVALIER DAILY

The Cavalier Daily interviewed seven University students who have reported feeling as though Ryan's letter revealed a more reliable account of the events leading to his resignation than Sheridan's, which these students said left many questions unanswered.

is stepping in that way, and also the fact that the federal government then basically uses their ... influence, to force Jim Ryan to resign," Schaefer said. "The Board of Visitors is [under] the Virginia government's control. The federal government should not be putting their hands in that."

In her letter, Sheridan wrote that Ryan's resignation came at his own suggestion to see if it would improve the University's standing with the Justice Department. Ryan contrasts that in his letter, asserting that those around him — including Sheridan — told him he had to resign.

Ryan concluded his letter with six questions he claimed remain unanswered about the events leading to his resignation. The questions ask for a clearer message about who specifically demanded his resignation and whether Ryan was lied to about a written agreement made with the Justice Department prior to him resigning.

Third-year Batten student Jess Drennan said she appreciated these open-ended questions Ryan left in his letter, as she said it proves he was able to admit he is not fully aware of his situation. She said that

in contrast, Sheridan's letter seemed to not fully report everything she knows and instead comes off that she is covering something up about the situation.

Additionally, Drennan said it struck her that Ryan pointed out in his letter his choice to wait until Nov. 14 to release his statement — Nov. 13 marked the three-year anniversary of the shooting on Grounds that killed three football players, and was the day Sheridan sent her letter to the Faculty Senate.

"When you compare [Ryan's letter] with Sheridan releasing her letter on the anniversary of the shooting, I think it just [shows] the contrast there between who has the University's best interest at heart and who maybe has their own gain at heart," Drennan said.

Marsden echoed a similar sentiment to Drennan in terms of what the letters reveal about Ryan's character. Marsden said he feels Sheridan's letter depicts Ryan in a way that does not match the way University members came to know him.

"I felt like Sheridan's letter portrayed Ryan as ... acting somewhat irrationally and even recklessly,"

Marsden said. "But given Ryan's account, his actions make a lot more sense, given that he didn't know a lot of what was happening behind his back."

When analyzing Ryan's letter as a whole, students said there are important outstanding questions that need to be answered — even beyond the six questions Ryan wrote himself.

Second-year College student Caleb Quiroga asked why the Justice Department was having to communicate through Sheridan, who was not rector at the time, rather than speaking directly with Ryan or then-Board Rector Robert Hardie.

"There was a June letter from the Department of Justice for Rachel Sheridan, in which they referred to her as Rector Sheridan, despite her not being rector yet. I want to know why they were doing this," Quiroga said.

Evan Davisson, third-year Batten and College student, said that after reading Ryan's letter, he questioned why it seemed the Board made all of their decisions regarding Ryan's resignation without consulting the University community.

"If [the Board] genuinely [be-

lieved] that Jim Ryan was not fit to serve as the president of this University, then why was this not a University wide discussion?" Davisson said. "Why was this a decision made by a few people in a locked room? I think that that's something that I have yet to come up with a reason [as to] why that would be the case."

Drennan said that in response to the letter, the University's next ideal step would be to stop the presidential search until Gov.-elect Abigail Spanberger takes office Jan. 17. She said she feels the current Board is misaligned with what the University community wants for the next president.

"I think the search for the president should stop, and that might be a little bit controversial because I know that Spanberger is not in office yet," Drennan said. "I think these letters make it really clear that [the Board is] not even conducting themselves in a way that's ethical and in a way that's — you could say — legal."

Federal research funding uncertainty halts progress

Uncertainty about the continuation of federal research funding — beginning with NIH cuts this spring — has created distress among researchers

Grace Little | Senior Associate

The federal government cut over \$60 million in research grant funding to the University in February, while other universities faced federal funding cuts in the hundreds of millions or billions of dollars.

The fallout of these cuts to lab funding, along with ensuing cuts and reorganizations of funding institutions more broadly, has materialized in frozen grant money and unreviewed grants for many University researchers. Additionally, University researchers say there is a lack of clarity surrounding which projects merit and will receive funding.

Graduate students at the University are also impacted by these funding changes. Graduate students' salaries are dependent on federal and internal funding sources, meaning many graduate students are pressured to pick up extra teaching assistantship work when their labs face funding uncertainties.

Asst. Psychology Prof. Aaron Reuben researches the connections between the physical environment and the brain, and he is interested in treating and preventing neuropsychiatric diseases. According to Reuben, the large-scale funding changes have burdened his lab's work.

"[Changes to grants have] been a strain on our staff, our collaborations and, ultimately, the quality of our science," Reuben said.

Other University researchers share Reuben's uncertainty around funding, including Huiwang Ai, professor of Physiology & Biophysics, Chemistry and Biomedical Engineering, who specializes in protein engineering research. Ai said that many of his colleagues have had their grants unexpectedly cancelled.

More broadly, Ai noted that National Institutes of Health's transition to a multi-year funding policy, which means the full cost of multi-year grants is provided upfront, has made it more difficult for investigators to renew existing grants or secure new ones.

Historically, the NIH used published paylines and peer-review score thresholds that reasonably indicated to researchers whether applications would receive funding. However, Ai said that the institution recently switched to no longer using published paylines nor threshold peer-review scores as the primary basis for funding decisions. According to Ai, in the past, while grant applications could still take a while before researchers heard final funding decisions, researchers could rely on this published information for funding stability.

"With NIH moving away from using published paylines or peer-review scores as the primary basis for funding decisions, this former sense of predictability is gone, adding significant

uncertainty and anxiety for investigators," Ai said.

Biology and psychology Prof. Xiaorong Liu researches retinal structures and their function, and she said her lab is funded by NIH money and has faced NIH proposal review delays. Xiaorong Liu said many proposals waiting to be reviewed by NIH are backlogged in the system due to both the government shutdown and funding cuts, meaning a proposal of hers that scored well two years ago is still pending funding.

"You [used to] have some sort of expectation, [that] if I score [well], it's supposed to be funded," Xiaorong Liu said. "Under [the] current situation, you don't know where that threshold is anymore ... it's really hard to tell ... it's more or less random in a way."

Ai said that given this funding uncertainty, his lab has paused recruiting new postdoctoral fellow and graduate students because it is increasingly difficult to commit to long-term training without funding clarity.

Xiaorong Liu said many Universities have already cut down the number of incoming graduate students they are accepting due to funding uncertainties. According to Xiaorong Liu, her lab will most likely not recruit new students next year to save money, and she and her colleagues are careful about starting new projects.

"I have to be cautious," Xiaorong Liu said. "I need to save money to keep the ongoing projects, and new students means new money, new resources [that] I don't have."

Brent Gunnoe, associate dean for graduate education in the College and chemistry professor, said that his lab relies on funding from National Science Foundation and Department of Energy grants but not on any NIH money. His work relates to renewable energy, and one of his grants exploring commercialization of a new technology to make large-scale commodity chemicals has three budget periods.

Gunnoe's lab achieved all of the milestones to reach budget period two in May after finishing budget period one, but the lab is currently still waiting to receive the second round of funding with no insight as to when this money will come. This grant was being funded through the DOE's Energy, Efficiency and Renewable Energy Office, which has recently been eliminated and absorbed by the Office of Critical Materials and Energy Innovation.

"This new office reflects the current administration's focus on the importance of domestic sources of critical materials, but there's also the energy innovation title," Gunnoe said. "This could be good news for us, in the sense that this change may mean that the individuals who are involved with



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Chemistry lab on Grounds, photographed Nov. 19, 2025.

this program will go in and they'll start making decisions on grants.

Reuben said that his lab, similar to Gunnoe's, has faced new NIH rules applied to grants already underway. Changes to one of his active grants have disrupted his ongoing data collection, in addition to funding uncertainty that the lab is facing in general.

"There is of course new uncertainty about pay lines and funding levels that keeps us up at night," Reuben said.

For Xiaorong Liu's lab, the group receives additional funding from private sources including BrightFocus and the Knight Templar Eye Foundation to supplement NIH funding. Xiaorong Liu said, however, that these funding sources are significantly smaller — an NIH grant is on the scale of millions, while a private grant is usually around \$100,000 or \$200,000. Xiaorong Liu said private grants provide a buffer and allow researchers to maintain current projects.

"Each [grant review] cycle, you submit different things ... it's just getting harder [to get approval]," Xiaorong Liu said. "You used to see one out of five [get approved], now it's one out of one hundred."

It is not just the heads of labs who feel the strain of the funding changes — Cai Liu, graduate Arts & Sciences student, said the funding situation has influenced how she and her peers view career futures in academia. Cai Liu conducts research for the Emotion and Behavior Lab. For Cai Liu, working in academia has always been a goal, but she said many other graduate students

are increasingly considering careers in the private sector for more stable pay.

"As someone who has always hoped to stay in academia, this change has been discouraging," Cai Liu said. "It's also opened up important conversations about what sustainable research careers look like."

Cai Liu said she should have been eligible to apply for NSF's Graduate Research Fellowship Program — a prestigious and well-paid fellowship for graduate students nationwide. Cai Liu spent much of the past year preparing to apply, but just as she was wrapping up, NSF released new guidelines, which made second-year students ineligible.

"It was a big disappointment, and many students in my cohort were similarly affected," Cai Liu said. "I have to admit that it felt a bit unfair, especially after all that preparation."

In addition to federal and private foundation funding, many labs at the University rely on internal funding. According to Gunnoe, just over two years ago, the Graduate Excellence Campaign — a fundraising campaign with the College Foundation — was launched. Gunnoe said internal research funding allows graduate students and labs to remain somewhat stable amidst funding uncertainty. The money earned from this endowment supports graduate students in the Arts and Sciences, and Gunnoe said that these funds have given the University a buffer compared to other universities.

"[The campaign] is an opportunity for us to somewhat buffer ourselves

from the ebb and flow of politics and federal funding, and that's a really exciting opportunity," Gunnoe said.

Despite other resources that allow many researchers to continue ongoing projects, Ai warned that the recent decline in research funding security could lead to a decline of national scientific prestige.

"This staged and decreasing funding environment — combined with the rising costs required to run research programs — risks diminishing the competitiveness of the U.S. scientific enterprise," Ai said. "The United States has historically played a leading global role in research innovation, but these trends threaten to erode that position."

According to the New York Times, NIH funding for 2025 thus far is down 13 percent, and the White House plans to shrink the agency's budget by \$18 billion, or nearly 40 percent, in 2026. The Trump administration released its proposed FY 2026 budget that would cut \$5 billion from the NSF's current \$9 billion annual budget. The NIH also lost nearly 3,000 employees this year, or about 14 percent of its work force.

Reuben said that despite these federal cuts, his lab will continue to depend on national funding.

"I continue to plan to rely on NIH to fund our work and advance the health of our nation," Reuben said.

Brendon Bordwine contributed to reporting.

A look at free speech on Grounds

Despite outside criticism, the University has many ongoing free speech initiatives which promote civil discourse

Nina Broderick | Senior Associate

Out of 257 schools, the University dropped from last year's first place ranking to 21st in The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression 2026 College Free Speech Rankings, released in September. In comparison to last year's first-place ranking score of 73.41, this year the University earned a score of 70.33 out of 100 points. Amidst this decline in the rankings, the University offers a range of resources and events with the goal of promoting a positive free speech climate on Grounds.

The College Free Speech Rankings are an annual report produced by FIRE — a non-profit organization that aims to defend free expression rights — and CollegePulse, a survey and analytics company. They surveyed 68,510 undergraduate students at 257 American universities for its 2026 rankings. Data collected spans from Jan. 3 to June 5, according to the 2026 report.

FIRE included the University within a group of schools the organization said have consistently fostered an environment conducive to protecting free expression. However, the report noted that most institutions within this category — such as the University with its C- grade — had only received scores between 70 and 80 points.

Although the University dropped by 20 ranks, its individual score only dropped by about 3 percentage points between the 2025 and 2026 rankings. Connor Murnane, FIRE's campus advocacy chief of staff, said that by better educating the student body about free speech initiatives and expectations, the University has the potential to reach the top again.

"If I'm anyone at UVa., I'm looking at the severe drop in some of these student categories," Murnane said. "I'm saying, 'Okay, how can we better communicate? How can we better educate the student body to make sure that [the students] get it, but they also get that [the administration] gets it?'"

The University prides itself on its offering of a wide range of resources with the goal of promoting a positive free speech climate on Grounds. An official statement from the University on free expression and inquiry is available on the University's free speech website, and was adopted by the Board of Visitors in 2021. The free speech website also contains resources related to free expression policies and programs on Grounds.

"The University of Virginia unequivocally affirms its commitment to free expression and free inquiry," the statement reads. "All views, beliefs and perspectives deserve to be articulated and heard free from interference. This commitment underpins every part of the University's mission."

A specific initiative on Grounds is

Think Again, which aims to promote civil conversations among the University community from all parts of the political spectrum. Marsh Pattie, associate vice president for student affairs, specifically mentioned Think Again's "Free Speech Fridays" as part of the initiative.

"[At Free Speech Fridays] students gather with faculty over free lunch in the historic Rotunda for events such as 'Disagree with a Professor,' in which faculty bring controversial statements of their own creation — some serious, some funny — and engage in constructive disagreement with students," Pattie wrote in a statement to The Cavalier Daily.

Mary Kate Cary, Think Again director and deputy chief of staff for communications and strategic initiatives for Interim University President Paul Mahoney, emphasized Think Again's mission to encourage discussion across differences beyond social media.

"Our goal is to get students to take off the headphones, put down the cell phone, look each other in the eye and have civil discourse, interesting conversations, arguments, disagreements, and learn how to use those muscles," Cary said.

In addition to Think Again's initiatives, Cary also said that the president's office is hosting events promoting free speech as a part of the 250th anniversary celebration of the Declaration of Independence next year. Specifically, the office hopes to host a speaker series, with two events in the spring and two events in the fall.

Pattie also mentioned a recent partnership between Student Affairs and Freedom Forum — a national foundation which aims to "foster First Amendment freedoms for all" — to produce a free speech brochure distributed to all students at opening convocation in August. Pattie said that the hope of the Office of Student Affairs is that resources like these will further educate students on their First Amendment rights on a college campus.

"Our goal is to promote more awareness around students' rights under the First Amendment while also helping them understand certain limits," Pattie wrote. "Engaging in behaviors not protected by the First Amendment and that violate University policy ... would potentially result in referral to the University Judiciary Committee."

The multi-fold brochure gives an explanation of the First Amendment, students' free expression rights on a university campus, an explanation of hate speech and how students can know if it is protected speech and an infographic outlining when and where students have the right to protest.

Further, Pattie noted the free expression efforts of the Karsh Institute of Democracy, specifically its Civic Cornerstone Fellowship. According to the program's website, the fellowship was designed to combat the challenge of engaging in meaningful conversation in a "hyper-partisan political climate."

Stefanie Georgakis Abbott, director of programming at the Karsh Institute, said in an email statement to The Cavalier Daily that the program welcomed 400 students this fall semester from all 12 of the University's schools.

"Over the course of a semester, students engage in sustained peer conversations across lines of ideology and identity, with a consistency that supports the development of civic and intellectual virtues such as curiosity, intellectual humility, open-mindedness and empathy," Georgakis Abbott said.

Georgakis Abbott said that she hopes the program's lessons transfer to the real world, whether the students are conversing with peers, their professors or family members.

In FIRE's rankings, the most significant category of each school's overall score is the student survey — 315 University students were surveyed for the 2026 ranking. According to Murnane, this category makes up 60 to 65 percent of the overall ranking.

Murnane said that even though policy foundation and administrative action data is helpful, student surveys tell a deeper truth about the free speech climate on college campuses.

"We do really like to see that institutional neutrality statement ... but so much of it is cultural," Murnane said. "That's why the student survey component we do every year is what really has the biggest influence."

In August 2024, the University issued a "statement on institutional statements," declaring that the University would adopt a policy of institutional neutrality, meaning it would not make any official statements on social or political issues unless they pertain to university operations.

Murnane noted that the student survey category was where the University lost several points in its overall score from the 2025 to the 2026 ranking. This year, the University ranks 211 on "Comfort Expressing Ideas" compared to 107 last year. The University also ranks 210 on "Administrative Support" compared to 97 last year.

Looking forward, Cary said that she sees the University headed in the direction of a more positive free speech climate — she hopes that by continuing and further expanding the free speech efforts on Grounds, the University can increase its free speech climate score.

"The things that [the University] is doing, both inside and outside the



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Free speech brochure distributed to students at opening convocation, photographed Aug. 24, 2025.

classroom, I think could really help with the scores," Cary said. "Students are learning how to be more and more comfortable with speaking up for what they believe and making their case with evidence."

Cary said that she hopes the efforts by the president's office for the Declaration of Independence's 250th anniversary will further promote a positive free speech climate in the coming calendar year.

In a University-specific report from FIRE, it is recommended that the University incorporate "robust First Amendment education into first-year orientation," to further educate students on their freedom of expression rights. Cary said that she is hoping the University will be able to integrate this into new student orientation this summer.

Additionally, Murnane noted that rankings only tell so much about the school's free speech environment. When the University was ranked first, its overall score was 73.41. Claremont McKenna College, ranked first in the most recent report, has an overall score of 79.86. Murnane emphasized

that universities have room for improvement every year in their overall scores, despite their position compared to other schools.

Also according to the report, seven in 10 University students are uncomfortable disagreeing with a professor and self-censor during classroom discussions. Additionally, only 24 percent of students found the administration either "very" or "extremely" clear in protecting freedom of speech. 46 percent considered the administration "somewhat" clear.

Murnane noted that the University's next president could play a significant role in the reshaping of free speech on Grounds and therefore could impact the University's 2027 ranking. The University's presidential search is ongoing, following former University President Jim Ryan's resignation in June after pressure from the Department of Justice.

"Whoever the new president [will be], new presidents have an awesome opportunity, more often than not, to redefine the campus culture," Murnane said. "I would love to see UVa. climb back up to the top."

LIFE

Setting the table or setting the agenda?

After leaving the Charlottesville bubble, many students deal with political polarization at home

Abby Snowden and Adair Reid | Staff Writers

As soon as Thanksgiving and winter breaks roll around each year, students slam their laptops shut, eager to trade late-night study sessions for home-cooked meals and long-awaited rest. But for some, holiday breaks are anything but restful. After a semester of engaging in classroom discourse, many students return to households where similar conversations — especially about politics — spark conflict rather than curiosity.

Third-year College student Molly Russell said she often finds herself politically at odds with her family. She explained how walking into her home over break can feel like walking on eggshells.

“I tend to spend a lot of time alone in my room in order to regulate, because there definitely is a lot of tension in my family,” Russell said. “[So] I kind of just suppress it.”

In recent years — as Americans have felt more politically divided than at any point since the Civil War — conversations with ideologically-distant family members can feel not just uncomfortable, but demoralizing. So if they haven’t already, many students will likely experience stress about political conversations this season, whether at Christmas dinner or over a New Year’s toast.

In an email statement to The Cavalier Daily, Nikki Kain, assistant director of programming for the Karsh Institute of Democracy, explained that during the holidays, students spend more concentrated time with extended family members that they do not regularly see. This, she said, can make the holidays feel particularly politically charged.

“That dynamic alone can heighten tension around political topics, and that stress doesn’t lend itself well to productive conversations, especially with those who hold different political views,” Kain said. “People tend to be more reactive in times of stress.”

From debates about social issues to arguments over divisive politicians, tension can pervade any family, even within those that typically see eye-to-eye. Beckett Smith, member of College Republicans and fourth-year College student, explained that there are political discrepancies within his own family, even though they largely identify as conservative.

“My dad’s side of the family is very populist Republican, and I am very socially right, but very economically left. So I disagree with them a lot on that kind of stuff,” Smith said. “My grandmother is actually the one that I talk about with politics all the time. She’s very left, but she gives me all kinds of hell for my positions.”

Similarly, Russell has opposing political beliefs from the majority of her family. She leans “quite far left,” she said, while her parents frequently vote Republican. She noted how this difference in opinion can lead to self-censorship as she tries not to rock the boat.

“I used to be very outspoken, and it would just constantly lead to a pattern of rejection ... they’re clearly not willing to listen and learn from me or have an open discussion,” Russell said.

This extended, concentrated time with relatives often makes one issue, or even one politician, the crux of every heated disagreement. Like many others, third-year Engineering student Will Kittrell identified a core source of conflict for many families — the president of the United States.

“Bottom line, just Trump ... If [my uncle] is at Thanksgiving, there’s a fight at the table. And because of that, I have not had Thanksgiving with him since pre-COVID,” Kittrell said. “There’s definitely a wedge between me and my immediate family and my cousins and aunts and uncles who [are] kind of crazy about Trump.”

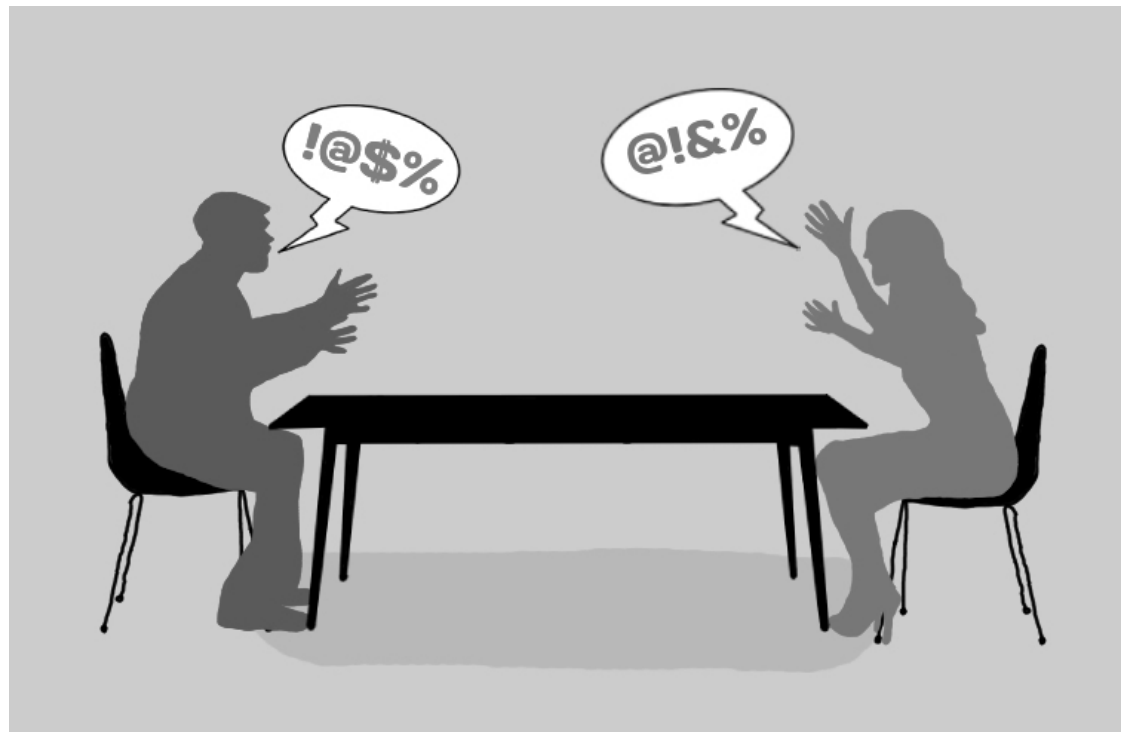
In accordance with this idea, Smith agreed that, even among his more conservative family members, President Trump has caused further division between populist relatives, traditional conservatives and even centrists who often lean right.

“[Trump] is not something that I feel like we would have really talked about before Trump era politics,” Smith said. “My grandmother ... was sort of center-right before and has been pushed very far to the left just because she really, really dislikes him.”

Russell said these shifts have deepened feelings of frustration and alienation for her. In particular, she said that as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, the stakes of a conversation about Trump feel quite personal. From reversing Biden-era protections for LGBTQ+ folks to barring transgender people from military service, the current administration has attacked a “central” part of her identity, and arguing with her parents about Trump’s policies can feel hurtful, she said.

“It’s extremely frustrating to have people that you love and deep down, [who] know [you], love you and care for you deeply, vote in immediate opposition to that,” Russell said.

Aside from differences in ideology, these students also noted that generational differences can spark disagreements. Over the holidays, many students see older relatives who have vastly different takes on contemporary politics — takes that



PRATHA RAVANI | THE CAVALIER DAILY

are rooted in their mid-20th century upbringings.

Beyond the typical “Baby Boomer versus Generation Z” discourse, some students said that they feel frustrated growing up in a very different world than that of their older family members. Smith noted that the current state of the economy is a contentious issue he feels strongly about — and one he struggles to help his grandmother understand.

“A lot of my generation feels a little stuck,” Smith said. “I’ve had this conversation with my grandmother a million times [where she’s said], ‘You guys complain about housing prices too much, you just have to work a little harder,’ [even though her] house was \$20,000 and [she] lived in a massive house on the top of a hill.”

Russell said that to reconcile the generational gap — which can sometimes make connection feel impossible — she reminds herself that her family members were influenced by their life experiences, not by anything necessarily in their control.

“Your own personal experiences shape who you are and how you end up acting, and that shapes how you vote,” Russell said. “If you grew up in a homogenous community of people that just looked like you and had the exact same opinions as you, you would never be able to understand another person’s point of view.”

Like Russell, Smith acknowledged that such political convictions have been instilled in his family members over time, and there is not much he can do to shift their positions on

certain issues. Now, he seeks to promote engaging, thoughtful discourse, rather than simply trying to convince others of the merits of his beliefs.

“They have their ideas, and they’re not particularly interested in changing their minds, which is okay,” Smith said. “I still have fun talking to them ... maybe because I just enjoy arguing with people.”

Several programs at the University help students develop these conversational skills, including the Karsh Institute’s Civic Cornerstone Fellowship. Kain said the program equips fellows to navigate heated conversations about politics with curiosity and respect, rather than by getting defensive.

“One of the most effective strategies we’re seeing [fellows] employ when navigating politically charged family environments centers around curiosity,” Kain said. “When students are able to put what they’ve learned to practice, they lead from a place of seeking to understand rather than to persuade.”

Kain said that students can lead with curiosity by asking reflective, open-ended questions, like, “How ... has your environment shaped your political views?” or “Why do you feel so strongly about this [issue]?” She said these questions spark discussion rather than dispute, which leads to insightful discourse — unlike just coming in and saying, “Here’s why I’m right.”

Russell said that in the few times she has these kinds of intentional, curiosity-driven conversations across

the aisle, she and her conversation partner have walked away with open minds and a greater understanding of another perspective.

“Everyone is in their echo chambers [on] their side [and] they don’t want to have these conversations,” Russell said. “And I will say, I do like having those conversations with people who think differently than me — if they’re willing to have a calm conversation about it ... If [they’re] willing to say, ‘Oh, I haven’t thought about it that way.’”

In a political landscape where polarization can relegate people into silos, finding common ground can seem out of reach. Yet, Kain said connecting with others through deliberative dialogue is a “cornerstone of democratic participation.” She encouraged students, in the midst of their tense holiday political discussions, to treat moments of friction as opportunities to learn and grow, instead of resigning themselves to talking past their relatives.

Along the same vein, Russell encouraged anyone who is willing to have an open-minded conversation to do so this holiday season. In the midst of a volatile political landscape, she emphasized how important it is to communicate respectfully across differences — and what better time to try than at a family gathering?

“Having those conversations is important,” Russell said. “And being able to communicate with people who think differently than you is really important — especially now.”

A student's holiday gift guide

Thoughtful, charming and budget-friendly gifts for every person you forgot you needed to shop for

Anna Stamey | Staff Writer

Every late November, the same panic sets in. Somewhere between finals week crashouts and one-too-many Friendsgivings, it registers that you promised actual human beings actual gifts. And unless your bank account looks wildly different from mine, you're probably working with a budget that wouldn't survive five minutes on the Downtown Mall.

The good news? Gift-giving doesn't have to mean shelling out \$58 for an ethically-sourced candle. Thoughtful and bargainous presents exist, even for gifters living in first-year dorms or who spend their money almost exclusively on Starbucks — yeah, guilty.

So without further ado, here's your carefully-curated guide to holiday gifting, organized into gift archetypes to make things slightly less stressful whilst balling on a budget.

The "Charlottesville local"

Charlottesville is loaded with hidden gem establishments that make

for charming, budget-friendly gifts. DashingxDarling Boutique and Twice-is-Nice are gold mines for unique jewelry, scarves or purses, while locally roasted coffee beans from Grit or She-nandoah Joe make a perfect pick-me-up for the caffeine-dependent friend. These gifts not only feel personal, but show that you know your way around town — a win for you and your chic coffee-drinking friends.

The "my parents will cry at this"

Shopping for the people who insist every year that "they want nothing" can be quite the challenge — and more often than not, that's our parents. When in doubt, choose something heartfelt. A framed photo of you on Grounds or a short handwritten letter reflecting on your semester is the kind of gift that they'll remember. Print a photo at CVS and pair it with a thrifted frame for extra charm — it's wholesome, inexpensive and always earns a warm, "this means more than anything

you could've bought."

The "under \$10 but still cool"

It's surprisingly easy to find a great gift without breaking the bank. Here are a few actually fun and useful gifts that stay under \$10. A NeeDoh for the fidgety friend, a wood cutting board from HomeGoods for the foodie or a cat chopsticks rest for the whimsical ramen enthusiast. You can also go simpler with a mini succulent or two from Lowe's, a color-by-number from Michaels or a fun mug from World Market. Under \$10 doesn't always have to equate to "boring stocking stuffer" — it just means you're thoughtful as well as financially responsible. If all else fails, wrap a candle in brown paper, add a little ribbon and pretend it's from a happening, urban dispensary downtown. It works every time.

The "experiences, because we're all broke"

Sometimes, the best present isn't

a physical thing at all — it's spending time with someone. A sunset drive to Carter Mountain is a classic spot for students for a reason, and a literally take-your-breath-away hike to Humpback Rock feels surprisingly wholesome once you make it to the top. Or perhaps a themed dinner-and-movie night — maybe a home-cooked comfort meal and rom-com, or Trader Joe's snack haul and Netflix documentary. Even small things count, like grabbing hot chocolate and walking around Grounds post-Lighting of the Lawn — something even the car-less crowd can pull off. Experiences prove you don't need an abundance of cash to show you care — maybe just a car or knowledge of bus routes, good weather and good spirits.

The "last-minute panic"

Let's be honest, we've all forgotten someone — a roommate, sibling or dare I say your situationship who you swore you "weren't doing gifts with."

For these emergencies, I suggest a box of seasonal Trader Joe's chocolate, a gift card to their favorite cafe or personal care basket. And for my non-driving friends, items from Corner staples like Starbucks, CVS or Insomnia Cookies make for easy, last-minute grabs, from coffee tumblers to seasonal nail polish. These gifts scream, "I definitely remembered you," even if you purchased them a half-hour before handing them over. Efficiency is a virtue, especially at this time of year.

Holiday gifting as a college student is a chaotic scramble of limited funds, good intentions and the hope that you remembered to take off the price tag. But honestly, the best gifts aren't the exuberant ones you drop a bag on — they're the tiny reminders that someone cares.

Friends of PHAR empowers public housing advocacy

Recently named a CIO, the organization unites students to advocate for housing equity in Charlottesville

Charley Thomas | Staff Writer

Last year, Charlottesville was named the fifth happiest place to live in the United States — but the ranking does not tell the whole story. Over the past few years, rent prices in Charlottesville have skyrocketed, pushing many long-time residents beyond the limits of Albemarle County. The city of Charlottesville also has a longstanding history of displacing minority communities. So for many residents who live in public housing, this "happiest place" looks and feels very different.

To this day, Charlottesville locals continue decades-long efforts to advocate for community housing interests. Many are members of the Public Housing Association of Residents, a non-profit organization dedicated to advocating for and with public housing residents in the area.

As a way to stand in solidarity with these locals, a group of University students formed Friends of PHAR, a CIO that partners with PHAR to fight for local policy that better represents the needs of public housing residents in Charlottesville. Abba Kodiaga, president of Friends of PHAR and fourth-year College student, said that she was inspired to join PHAR in order to become a more active member of the Charlottesville community — especially given the historically fraught relationship between the University and

its neighbors.

"I think it's important to learn and engage with UVA's relationship to the greater Charlottesville area, and more specifically, Black communities here," Kodiaga said.

When it was first founded in 2022, Friends of PHAR was originally a group of students researching local public housing grants. Since then, Friends of PHAR has grown to about 20 members, achieving official CIO status in May. The CIO allows students to tailor their advocacy to meet historically underserved needs of public housing residents in Charlottesville and take on new housing issues as they arise, such as proposals for luxury apartment complexes that infringe on existing local communities.

Kodiaga stressed that University students are key actors in advancing this grassroots advocacy.

"We want to educate the student population a lot more about housing here in Charlottesville because it's a big problem," Kodiaga said. "Often-times, we think that it's up to city officials to handle it, but as students, we do have a voice, and we do have the ability to support community members in the work that they do."

Rachel Mulvaney, vice president of Friends of PHAR and fourth-year Batten student, shares Kodiaga's aim of involving University students in activism beyond Grounds. Along-

side Kodiaga and other Friends of PHAR leaders, Mulvaney mobilizes members to attend city council meetings, arrange discussions with leaders of PHAR and organize various other events to channel their passion for housing equity into positive change.

"Throughout my time at UVA, I've learned so much about the destruction and displacement that UVA students have caused in the local community," Mulvaney said. "If there's anything I can do to give back to the local community and improve the relationship that exists between UVA and local residents, I want to contribute to that."

Before Friends of PHAR formally established its mission to advocate for Charlottesville public housing residents, Kodiaga was drawn to the initial student research group. The team's focus on data collection and local perspectives, she said, offered her a chance to engage with the local housing crisis first-hand early on in her college career.

"I was a first-year looking for ways to get involved in community organizing and bottom up approaches to solutions for the many inequalities faced by a lot of people and in the world, and specifically, Charlottesville," Kodiaga said.

In the years since she joined PHAR, Kodiaga's research experience has continued to be an as-

set to the group's advocacy as new challenges arise. For instance, Charlottesville's oldest and largest public housing community is located in a historically-Black neighborhood, and many public housing residents disapprove of a new proposal for luxury student housing in the area.

In response to these development plans, Kodiaga said that Friends of PHAR conducted a survey of University students to determine their housing preferences regarding price, location and other factors. The organization's research indicated that many students prioritize proximity to Grounds and have no intention of infringing upon local communities, decreasing support for LV Collective's proposal.

"Our data showed a lot," Kodiaga said. "For one thing, most students don't know that it's going up to begin with. That is interesting because they're building it 'for students,' but students don't even know it's an option."

This data is just one of the many tools in the Friends of PHAR's advocacy arsenal. The CIO has also spread the word through educational initiatives — recently, they helped organize a "Fall Fest" for public housing residents, complete with pumpkin painting, informational tabling and other fun activities for children.

Providing ample social context for these modern issues can be a

complicated task, and it is perhaps even more difficult to overcome the distrust felt by many Charlottesvilleans due to the University's historical ties to public housing displacement. Mulvaney said Friends of PHAR strives to repair that fraught relationship.

Mulvaney said she finds unfiltered, one-on-one conversations with public housing residents the most helpful. Speaking with Johnson one day, she gained valuable insight into how something as simple as moving a basketball court's location within a Charlottesville park completely transformed that space from a community pillar to a place only occupied by University students.

With challenges still lying ahead and decades of displacement not far in the past, Friends of PHAR still has many goals for progress in the future. The leaders of Friends of PHAR encourage students, whether they are from Charlottesville or not, to fight for fair housing for their community.

"It is important to be a good neighbor," Mulvaney said. "When you move somewhere for only four years, it is important to know about the people who have formed their whole lives here. Figuring out how to give to a place you're only at for four years is something that I think is super meaningful."

SPORTS

‘For all Virginia’: 2025 football bliss is euphoric and historic

The Cavaliers have crafted a storybook season for the whole University community

Xander Tilock | Sports Editor

For the first time in program history, Virginia football is the sole regular season ACC champion. And the Cavaliers are favored to win the ACC title game. And Virginia could be headed to the College Football Playoff.

All of these highlights have been a University student’s dream. This is especially true considering that, from 2022 to 2024, the Cavaliers won just 11 games. One more victory would bring the 2025 win total to 11 — the most wins in a single season across Virginia history. Not too shabby for a team that was projected to finish 14th in the ACC.

And as the team skyrockets up the standings, the University community has truly loved this team more than ever before.

“This year [school spirit] is 10,000 times stronger,” second-year College student Erin Sinclair said. “It’s just so fun to be like ‘yeah I go to UVa., yeah we’re top of the ACC right now,’ and especially to get our revenge on Virginia Tech.”

The feeling is mutual for players past and present.

“I love it,” former tight end Sackett Wood Jr. said. “You can feel this team. The energy, the hunger, connection. They have it going and I’m just pumped for the guys. It’s made this fall a lot of fun.”

Take the Commonwealth Clash, for example — a tale in which Virginia had long been David and Virginia Tech the mighty Goliath.

Not this time.

The roles were reversed Nov. 29, when the Cavaliers trounced their archrival to the southwest and earned a spot in the ACC Championship game.

For just the third time this century, Virginia beat the Hokies to win the Commonwealth Cup — ending a long drought defined by embarrassing defeats and lackluster performances by the Cavaliers. This win brought joy to the entire University community, not just the team, which Coach Tony Elliott pointed out postgame.

“It’s really about everybody else, to be honest with you,” Elliott said. “It was about the players, it was about the students. It was about the band. It was about the fans ... And it’s about all of the folks. That’s really what it was about.”

The cherry on top? A late addition to the evening’s forecast — a storm. That is, a calm and delayed rendition of a field storm. After a chaotic whirlwind against Florida State, the University requested that fans not storm the field, so after a brief delay, they strolled the field. The celebration was

fueled by players urging fans to celebrate together one more time to relish a rivalry win.

“I was taking all sorts of pictures with fans,” graduate tight end Sage Ennis said. “One of the fans got my email. Not sure how that happened. Got my email and emailed me the picture [of us] and talked about how much that meant, for that young kid to be able to take the picture. Emailed him back and let him know I appreciate them.”

The Scott Stadium field stroll — which did not result in a field storm fine — was punctuated by smiles all around and fireworks illuminating the Charlottesville night sky.

“It means the world that we are good at football and that Charlottesville is finally embracing this football culture and the tailgate atmosphere and just the game day experience,” fourth-year College student Hunter Blosser said. “It has been unlike anything I’ve ever seen through my four years here.”

However, the gameday experience was not perfect. Throughout the year, there have been safety issues with the student section on the Hill, where there is no convenient access to food, water or restrooms. To access those needs, students must leave the Hill — with a near-zero chance of reentry due to long lines.

“This is genuinely pathetic,” fourth year College student Clayton Rice said. “I can’t leave to go to the bathroom and also get back to my place.”

Against Virginia Tech, the Hill was listed at full capacity despite an abundance of open space.

“It was just surprising that for one of our biggest games of the season the Hill was only half full,” fourth-year College student Macy Lindblom said.

Throughout the 2025 season, University policy allowed all fans on the Hill — but for the Virginia Tech game, only University students could enter.

“My friends and I tried to go on the Hill but were not allowed to due to our friends from [other schools],” third-year Commerce student Jerry Levine said. “We had to find seats elsewhere that were nowhere near as good.”

University spokesperson Bethanie Glover offered a comment on the Hill situation.

“Fan safety is our top priority for athletic events, as University leaders noted in a message to the community in early October,” Glover said in a written statement to The Cavalier Daily. “We are grateful for student feedback on their experience as spectators on the Hill, and the considerable energy and enthusiasm they con-



ALBERT TANG | THE CAVALIER DAILY

Virginia fans celebrate on the field after beating Virginia Tech.

tribute to the game environment. We will continue to monitor the Hill experience to maintain the appropriate balance of crowd safety and a vibrant gameday experience.”

Hill issues aside, Virginia still recorded the largest student attendance in program history. Thousands of students cheered on a team that finished 10-2, tied for the program’s best regular season record ever. Through it all, the 4th Side showed up like never before.

“UVa. students didn’t go to games [in years past], and if they did, they left before the second half,” second-year Commerce student Megan Lamberson said. “[Reaching the title game] represents dedication to a goal even when no one else believed. It shows that even when there is little hope, putting the right people and support systems together can truly create something special.”

Not all students followed the team closely over the past few years. But as the Cavaliers became College Football Playoff contenders, football became the talk of Grounds.

“I learned recently the whole concept of cheering really loud [to hinder the opposing offense],” third-year Engineering student Will Conrad said. “And I think that’s a nice metaphor for the community rallying behind this team.”

Students said that they will look back fondly on the pair of excursions onto the field. But even on the occasions where storming the field was not the game’s curtain call, Saturdays were still well spent with friends at Scott Stadium.

“One moment that stands out was in the Washington State game when it was so loud at the end of the game and they got the false start penalties that ended up leading to the safety,” Lamberson said. “It was so awesome to see the crowd be so loud that it was able to actually have an impact.”

Especially for fourth-year students, Virginia’s historic season has been a blessing. The past three seasons were filled with far more losses than wins, and in the minds of some students, 2025 makes up for years of losing.

“What Tony and the coaching staff have done to this program has just invigorated the student body in ways I’ve never seen before,” Blosser said. “It’s something that I’m gonna look back on in 20 years and I can say I was a University of Virginia student in 2025.”

In particular, beating Virginia Tech is a win that the Cavalier faithful will never forget. The significance of being what Elliott called the “state champions,” is something all can take pride in.

“A win tonight [over the Hokies]

proves unequivocally that UVa. is the sports school of Virginia,” fourth-year College student Eli Bardash said. “Kids growing up in Virginia want to root for winners, and the Hoos will prove that they are the face of the state.”

Regardless of how the season ends, 2025 will go down in history as one of the best years Virginia football has ever had.

“UVa. having a good football team is more than just a few happy hours on Saturdays,” Lamberson said. “It is a representation of a culture shift and the product of years of continued effort even when no one believed.”

This special year, the University community believed. That is something that can be forever cherished.

“The turnout that we’ve had from the fans in the stadium has been phenomenal this year,” Ennis said. “And honestly, we’re not where we’re at at this point in the season without them.”

Ryan Weiner contributed reporting.

Chandler Morris prophesized a championship

The graduate quarterback arrived in Charlottesville with one goal and the drive to achieve it

Ryan Weiner | Senior Associate

“I didn’t come all the way to Virginia as a Texas boy to win five, six games. I want to win the conference championship.”

Graduate quarterback Chandler Morris made that proclamation in January transferring to Virginia. Ten months later, and with a 27-7 win over Virginia Tech Nov. 29, Morris has the Cavaliers just one win away from achieving exactly what he set out to do.

For anyone fortunate enough to see Morris after the victory against the Hokies, it was clear that he was taking in all the fruits of his labor. He was seen snapping pictures with young fans, holding up the Commonwealth Cup and smoking celebratory cigars with his teammates.

To Morris, winning the Commonwealth Cup is a defining highlight of his Cavalier career.

“It’s awesome,” Morris said. “I mean, I’m just very grateful for this opportunity. It means a lot to me, and I’m so grateful for it.”

Having the confidence to demand a conference championship at a program that has not won one since 1995 is a bold move by a quarterback in a locker room full of players he had never played with. But actually making it happen takes program-changing confidence. Instead of being proud of himself for believing in the program, Morris is proud of the program for believing in him.

“The whole building believed in [our goals] and I’m just so proud of everybody involved in the building,” Morris said. “This is a great opportunity that we have.”

The opportunity Morris speaks about is indeed great. While the Cavaliers claimed conference titles in 1989 and 1995, they did not have to win a game to earn those and instead shared them with Duke and Florida State, respectively. In what is just Virginia’s second appearance in the actual ACC Championship game, Morris will have a chance to win an outright title for the first time in school history.

But what is the backbone of Morris’ success? How did an undersized quarterback like him speak such lofty goals into reality?

In some ways, winning the regular season ACC title is the culmination of his long and obstacle-riddled college football career. Despite reaching the Big 12 Championship with Oklahoma in 2020 and TCU in 2022, Morris has yet to play a snap in a championship game.

That is going to change. He has an unbreakable will to win — as seen through his success when the lights get brightest. His diving touchdown run to take an overtime lead against Florida State and

his seven-yard run to set up a game winning touchdown against Louisville are just some of the magical moments he has provided. Morris does not see pressure as something to shy away from, and it shows in the way he leads the Cavaliers.

“There’s a lot of pressure on us and everything like that, but pressure is a privilege,” Morris said. “We’ve worked to put ourselves in this position and also to put ourselves in this position to have this opportunity.”

Going further, another testament of Morris’ drive comes from his willingness to not shy away from contact. Though it has caused a lot of wear and tear to his body in the form of upper body injuries, Morris never shies from lowering his shoulder if it means getting the extra inch. Coach Tony Elliott emphasizes to the whole team that football is a game of inches, but nobody takes that to heart more than Morris.

“He’s got a ton of fire, he’s a competitor, he’s a coach’s kid so he knows what it takes [to win],” Elliott said in an interview with ESPN.

Lastly, Morris prides himself on shaping the team’s mindset alongside Elliott to make the unrealistic seem realistic. Multiple times this season Morris has used the slogan, “don’t make a championship feel foreign” to demonstrate how a simple mindset change can affect a team’s play.

Morris bought into Elliott’s belief that, in this era of college football, it is easy for a team to make a one-year turnaround. But this is not guaranteed. A victory mentality along with leaders who exude it have to exist as well. Morris’ willingness to lead has fueled a collective buy-in from the squad unseen in previous years and is a key reason why Virginia has thrived in tight games.

As the ACC Championship game against Duke nears, Morris will look to use his and his teammates’ experience of being on teams in postseason games before to prepare adequately.

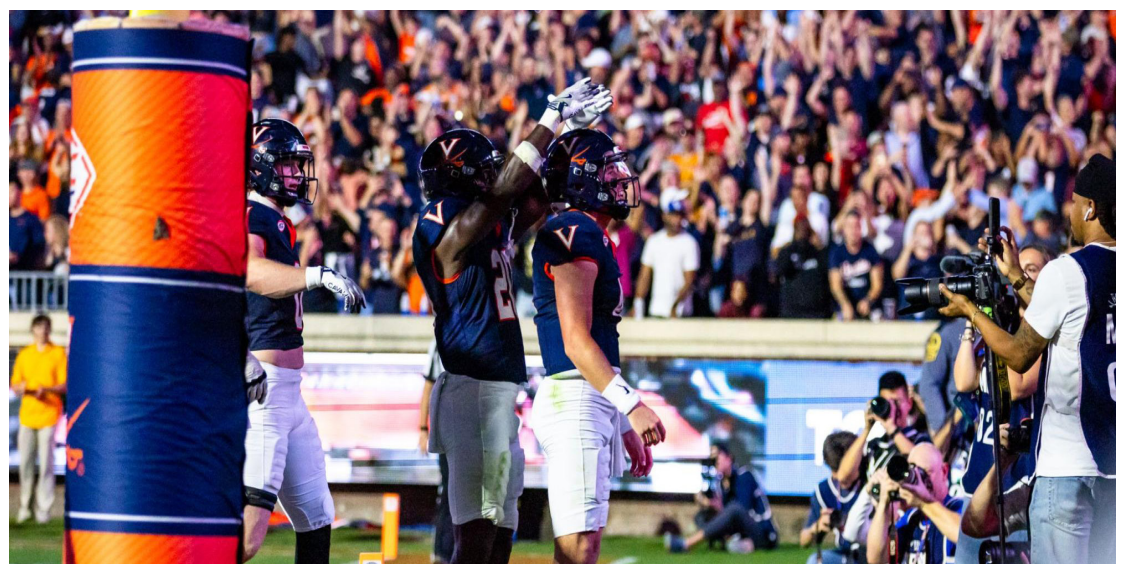
“[Experience] is going to be huge ... you got guys like Mitchell Melton and Jayden Thomas so it’s a lot of experience in championship games,” Morris said. “These past two weeks have been championship games and so [we] won’t change anything up and stick to [our] routine.”

Morris and Virginia are still not done yet. After all, his goal was to win the ACC Championship, not to make it there. Morris has a goal, knows it is within his reach and will do anything to make it reality.



BENVIN LOZADA | THE CAVALIER DAILY

“I’m just very grateful for this opportunity. It means a lot to me, and I’m so grateful for it,” Morris said.



ALBERT TANG | THE CAVALIER DAILY

Morris, crowned by Jahmal Edrine.



ALBERT TANG | THE CAVALIER DAILY

“We’ve worked to put ourselves in this position,” Morris said.

What went wrong for Virginia volleyball?

Three volleyball beat writers explore the missing pieces and the path back to championship contention

Victoria Blankenship, Lauren Halak and Cierra Lyle | Staff Writers

Virginia volleyball is in the midst of a 25-year drought in which it has not appeared in an NCAA Tournament.

As the 2025 season progressed, the Cavaliers fell apart, finishing their season ranked 13th in the 18-team ACC with a 13-17 record and a 6-14 conference record.

While the Cavaliers had a talented squad, something just did not click. Three Cavalier Daily beat writers discuss the season's flaws, along with what to look forward to in 2026.

What was the missing puzzle piece for Virginia volleyball this season?

Victoria Blankenship, Staff Writer: A drop in Cavalier veterans definitely hurt the team. While the Cavaliers had senior libero Kate Johnson this year, she was unfortunately the only four-year player for Wells' team. All of the other seniors in her class were transfers. Lack of continuity can hurt a team, as constantly taking on new players without a stable handful of teammates that have been there through it all can hurt consistency and chemistry.

Lauren Halak, Staff Writer: There

is a stark difference now compared to 2024. Last year, defensive specialist Milan Gomillion led the Cavaliers' defense. Her 487 total digs on the season ranked second in the ACC. She also recorded a career-high 37 digs, second-most in a single match in program history. This year, junior defensive specialist Katie Barrier's team-leading three digs per set is almost 15 less than Gomillion's average. While many factors play into this disparity, Virginia's ability to respond to quick, powerful offenses is key.

Cierra Lyles, Staff Writer: The Virginia offense lacked multiple power options. Without enough consistently productive options, opposing teams were able to plan their defenses around blocking the team's stars. This forced tougher situations for the Cavaliers, making their offense easier to scout and slow down, while also making it harder for the offense to sustain over long matches. With Boothe graduating, Virginia must find not only a replacement for her powerful arm, but additional power-hitters that help keep defenses honest.

With Memorial Gym closed for renovations, the team played most games

at the Aquatic and Fitness Center and select matches at JPJ. How did 'venue-hopping' affect the Cavaliers?

VB: The AFC held up surprisingly well as a temporary home. Early on, the team appeared unfazed by the change in scenery, and crowds still packed the smaller space. The issue wasn't the AFC itself, but rather the inability to stay there. Once they got into the groove of the season, it got harder to keep up with the changing locations — from the AFC, to away venues, to JPJ and back to the AFC — preventing the team from settling into a rhythm on their own court.

LH: The transition to the bigger stage at JPJ did not yield positive results. When asked about the change, Wells stood firm in her belief that "home is people" and Virginia fans make the atmosphere. Virginia went 2-3 in JPJ despite previously being undefeated in the arena. While playing multiple matches in a basketball arena is an exciting step for the program, the team did not adjust well to playing frequently in such a cavernous space, and the home-court advantage evaporated over the season.

CL: A major drawback this season

was the dilution of fan energy. In recent years, the JPJ Takeover was one of the most highly anticipated events of the season, with fans packing the arena. By turning a special occasion into a recurring series, the novelty wore off — after the first match, fans were far quieter and the arena far less full. The venue-hopping didn't single-handedly sink the season, but it chipped away at the crowd intensity that can help fuel the team's performance.

What does Virginia volleyball need to look like to get to the championship level?

VB: Both Commonwealth Clash games this season capture how Virginia needs to perform if it wants to contend. In their first matchup with Virginia Tech, the Cavaliers could have faltered after losing the first two sets — instead, they stayed focused, executed digs and mitigated mistakes. In the second matchup, Virginia easily shut down the Hokies' offense, building off of its first win. These rivalry matchups brought out the Cavaliers' best play — they need to bring this energy to future games.

LH: Virginia's victory against

Michigan was a true display of grit and its potential to build back to the championship level. The first matchup saw three players notch double-digit kills, a team effort where several players acted as offensive and defensive threats. Instead of relying solely on Ennist, Virginia rallied against Michigan as a cohesive unit. If the Cavaliers can find this rhythm consistently and give Ennist just enough of the offensive spotlight, they have a shot at dismissing this season as a one-off in the Wells era.

CL: Wells frequently echoes one goal — get back to playing Virginia volleyball. Instead, the Cavaliers need to identify this team's standard. It's easy to look at the 2024 season as the winning formula, but it's important to remember that this is a new team enduring growing pains and seeking a new identity. This is not to say that Virginia should drop the Virginia volleyball standard altogether — rather, they should find the right version. The Cavaliers need to find what works for the 2026 team if they want to become national contenders.

THE CAVALIER DAILY

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PUZZLE

Quinn Connor | Puzzle Editor

Answers are available on the digital version of this puzzle which is published at www.cavalierdaily.com.

ACROSS

- 1 Like a weed-out class
- 5 Recede, as the tide
- 8 Largest NATO member
- 11 "A lie that makes us realize the truth," per Picasso
- 14 This clue's number menos seis
- 15 Genre of many a Wattpad read
- 17 Two-player card game
- 18 Party of four U.S. presidents
- 19 One who gets lit at UVa. football games?
- 20 Killed it, in Gen Z lingo
- 21 The Jacksonville Jumbo Shrimp and Toledo Mud Hens play in it
- 23 Door opener
- 25 When you're reading this clue
- 26 Fortnite dance
- 28 Kings and queens, but not jacks
- 29 Brown shade
- 32 Like a top in motion
- 33 Natural burn soother
- 34 Neckwear at a Harry

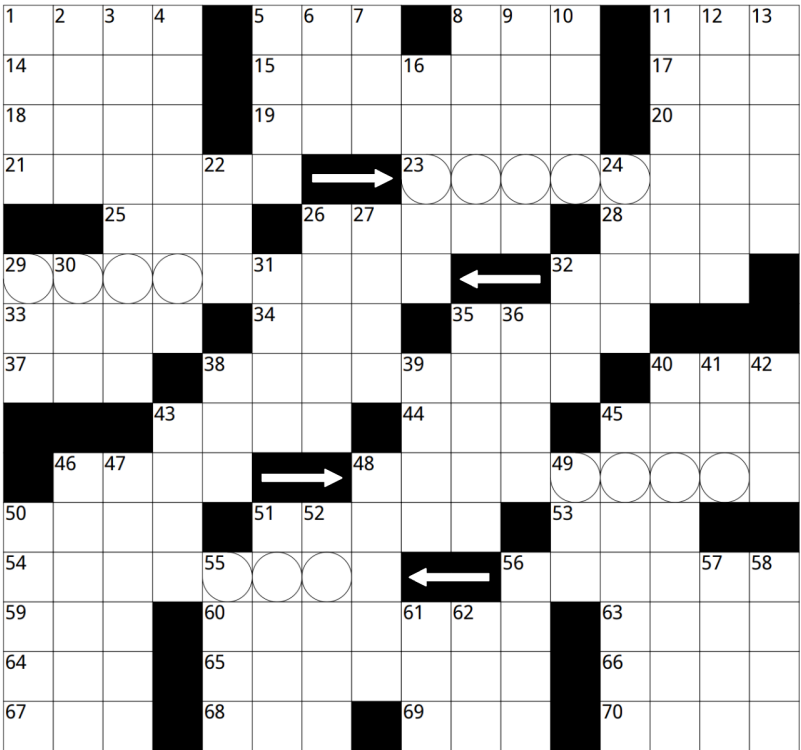
- Styles concert
- 35 American chip manufacturer
- 37 7 Day Junior 40-Down purchase
- 38 Spousal permission to sleep with a celebrity ... or a description of the exchange happening between four pairs of answers in this puzzle
- 40 Thumbs-down vote
- 43 "Love ____" (2012 Chief Keef hit)
- 44 Business that still encourages masks?
- 45 Transport for Mario
- 46 Linear algebra arrays of numbers
- 48 Shows surprise
- 50 Kit Kittredge or Felicity Merriman
- 51 Word in many public university names
- 53 Card game with a "Show 'Em No Mercy" variant
- 54 Dance move made famous by the Jackson 5
- 56 Made sick
- 59 Cyclops eye count

- 60 Back in the running?
- 63 Scrabble piece
- 64 Contraction in "The Good Ol' Song"
- 65 Room in all three original "Among Us" maps
- 66 Unknown author, for short
- 67 Summer hours in L.A.
- 68 Blacktop material
- 69 Since Jan. 1
- 70 Delivered

DOWN

- 1 Furry's cry
- 2 Feel sore
- 3 Fleetwood Mac song that takes its name from Welsh mythology
- 4 Damned
- 5 The Father of Art Deco
- 6 Archer's need
- 7 Weight-to-height ratio (abbr.)
- 8 Like the leftmost candle for seven nights of Hanukkah
- 9 Selena Gomez's band, with "The"
- 10 Aviation prefix

- 11 Rouse
- 12 Like "Finding Nemo" but not "Finding Dory"
- 13 Threes, in poker or basketball
- 16 Chain mail, e.g.
- 22 Kawaii emoticon
- 24 Slugger's stats
- 26 Virus named for a river
- 27 Word before "swipe" or "exchange"
- 29 La ____ (Bolivian capital)
- 30 Letters that might end a Valentine's Day text
- 31 Darden degs.
- 32 "S" in iOS, for short
- 35 Brain blunder
- 36 "Pronto!"
- 38 Laughs from 51-Down
- 39 Exam scored out of 1520
- 40 Substance in a JUUL pod
- 41 Jane Goodall subject
- 42 Shortest Magic 8 Ball response
- 43 Town almost destroyed in the D-Day invasion
- 45 Party animals
- 46 Brought up the rear?
- 47 Physicist Einstein



- 48 SEC athlete in orange and blue
- 49 First name in "The Hunger Games" and "Euphoria"
- 50 Sag
- 51 Christmas cookie consumer
- 52 Architecture style with steeply pitched roofs
- 55 Egg container
- 56 March Madness ranking
- 57 Musk of some new cars?
- 58 Bumper bruise
- 61 UVA, for one
- 62 Army rank above cpl.

CARTOON

Have a Holly, Jolly Charlotte

Blake Maguire | Cartoonist



Post-Break Disillusion

Sophia Lee | Cartoonist



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

A&E Wrapped: Three writers' picks for the best of 2025

The standout films, albums and books from a fascinating year of media

Caroline Lee, Amelia Lucien, Bridget Baile | Staff Writers

Fall leaves and Spotify Wrapped have dropped in tandem, two clear signs that the year is coming to a close. 2025 has been an interesting year in media, too unremarkable to be called truly special, but not unenjoyable in the content it has produced. Yes, there was no Barbenheimer, no Eras Tour, no all-encompassing, year-defining cultural phenomenon to represent the year as a whole, but that's not to say that 2025 lacked special moments in the arts and entertainment sphere.

There were Beyoncé concerts and Coldplay concerts and Katy Perry concerts in space. There was a Fantastic Four movie, a Superman movie and a KPop Demon Hunters movie — bad, middling and strangely good, respectively. There were winter Sundays when Kendrick Lamar dissed Drake to 100 million people, and summer Wednesdays where viewers gathered around screens in eager, or reluctant, anticipation of Belly Conklin's latest misstep.

Though 2025 may not go down in history as a cultural behemoth, some of its products might. From page to screen, sound to socials, three A&E writers sat down to share their superlative picks from the year in media.

Best Movie of 2025

Caroline Lee, Senior Writer: "Sinners" dir. Ryan Coogler

Set in 1930s Mississippi and telling the story of one fateful night at a juke joint, "Sinners" is a masterclass in original storytelling. Directed by Ryan Coogler and starring Michael B. Jordan, twice, "Sinners" sets up its world and characters with beautiful care, before transforming — much like a vampire — into an entirely different type of story. The film's second hour is riveting, a largely continuous sequence that showcases exceptional performances from a strong supporting cast, most notably newcomer Miles Caton. "Sinners" is as much of an examination of culture and identity as it is a thrilling display of vampiric horror, and Coogler's love and passion for his craft truly shines off the screen.

Amelia Lucien, Senior Writer: "One Battle After Another" dir. Paul Thomas Anderson

Paul Thomas Anderson's latest film, "One Battle After Another" tackles the complexities of fighting for progress with a sharp commentary on racism and immigration, using absurdism to reveal the harsh reality of current events. The film follows ex-revolutionary Pat, forced to come out of hiding to rescue his

daughter, Willa, from the clutches of Sgt. Lockjaw — an old enemy from Pat's past who had a complicated relationship with Willa's mother. The film deals with difficult issues, balancing suspense and violence with a surprising amount of humor and heart. The stunning cinematography, portrayal of father-daughter relationships and fearless political messaging make "One Battle After Another" more than your typical action film.

Bridget Baile, Staff Writer: "Bugonia" dir. Yorgos Lanthimos

"Bugonia" may be Yorgos Lanthimos's most accessible film to date, but anyone familiar with the Greek director's idiosyncratic style knows that this hardly promises a conventional viewing experience. The black comedy follows a conspiracy-obsessed man and his neurodivergent cousin as they kidnap a powerful CEO, believing she is an alien. The film satirizes corporate soullessness and conspiracy culture but does so through sympathetic characters with understandable motivations, a rarity among Lanthimos's films, which typically feature stiff and emotionless performances. Relevant and thought-provoking, "Bugonia" sticks the landing with a creative ending that's sure to be divisive — but definitely not forgettable.

Best Album of 2025

CL: "eternal sunshine deluxe: brighter days ahead" by Ariana Grande

A beautiful extension of "eternal sunshine," Ariana Grande's deluxe album subtitled "brighter days ahead" adds six new songs to the singer's emotional journey from hurt to healing. Like the film that inspired its title, "eternal sunshine" is centered around memory, but where the original 13 tracks deal more with heartbreak, the deluxe opens up new avenues for acceptance, with subtle and elegant pop production that showcases Grande's vocals and storytelling. "Not that I miss you, I don't / sometimes I just can't believe you happened," Grande sings on the standout "twilight zone," exemplifying the tone shift from reckoning to reflection — not a picture perfect resolution, but a peaceful realism that some days are better than others.

AL: "Getting Killed" by Geese

Following lead singer Cameron Winter's standout solo debut in 2024, Geese's "Getting Killed" delivers a much needed indie-grunge revival. The Brooklyn band takes their



MARIAM SESHAN | THE CAVALIER DAILY

more traditional rock sound in a new direction, blending experimental instrumentals with Winter's melancholic vocals. With the help of influential rap producer Kenny Beats, the composition of "Getting Killed" transcends the boundaries of traditional genres. Steeped in angst, religious symbolism and American mythology, Winter's painfully beautiful lyricism steals the spotlight. Tracks like "Au Pays Du Cocaine" and "Taxes" blend heartbreak with grit and edge, while "Trinidad" and "Getting Killed" embrace an experimentally dissonant style. Geese is one of the most exciting bands on the scene right now, ushering in an exciting new era of rock.

BB: "Addison" by Addison Rae

From TikTok to pop princess, Addison Rae's trajectory post-Hype House fame has been fascinating. Her debut album "Addison," released over the summer, was preceded by five singles — including her breakout hit "Diet Pepsi." "Addison" is a strong debut, diverting from Rae's earlier work to favor synth-heavy production and airy vocals. The album blends modern technology with Y2K pop influences, alternating between high-energy tracks like "Fame is a Gun" and "New York" and dreamier reflections like "Times Like These" and "Aquamarine." Imperfect but impressive, "Addison" showcases Rae's promise and interestingly, her ambition. Now that she's got a taste

of the glamorous life, she's not letting fame go anytime soon.

Best Book of 2025

CL: "Notes to John" by Joan Didion

Shortly following Joan Didion's death in 2021, her editors discovered a journal in her Manhattan apartment, whose contents have since been compiled and released with 2025's "Notes to John." The compilation shares 46 entries chronicling Didion's therapy sessions between 1999 and 2002, providing a unique perspective into the inner life of the celebrated essayist, and her turmoil on everything from her work to her mental health to her relationship with her daughter. In contrast to the refined elegance of her classic essays, "Notes to John" presents a more human and less polished version of Didion, enhancing the posthumous memoir's power and honesty.

AL: "Deep Cuts" by Holly Brickley

Lit-fic novel "Deep Cuts" by Holly Brickley lovingly navigates the 2000s music scene through the ever-evolving relationship of Percy, an opinionated music writer, and Joe, an aspiring musician. After meeting one night in a college bar, Percy and Joe embark on a musical partnership filled with angst, tension, love and every messy thing in between. The novel follows the pair into adulthood as they navigate complex relation-

ships, explore their sexuality and make their way in the music industry. Soundtracked with the best of indie rock, from the Strokes to LCD Soundsystem to Modest Mouse, the use of songs both real and imagined as a narrative device makes "Deep Cuts" an exciting read for music lovers.

BB: "Sunrise on the Reaping" by Suzanne Collins

"Sunrise on the Reaping" by Suzanne Collins was one of the most anticipated books released in 2025, and it delivered on sky-high expectations. The book — a prequel to the "Hunger Games" series — is an origin story for Katniss's gruff yet loveable mentor Haymitch Abernathy and an account of his victory in the 50th Hunger Games. The book smartly builds upon the established world of Panem, while still providing a fresh take that feels uniquely heart-breaking. Both die-hard "Hunger Games" fans and casual readers are sure to be satisfied by this tightly-paced, intriguing thriller.

While it is impossible to capture every piece of media that shaped 2025, these selections serve as a concentrated snapshot of the cultural landscape that defined its arts and entertainment scene. They represent not only the content that audiences consumed, but the shifting tastes and conversations that influenced such consumption.

The three local women who saved the Violet Crown

Brought together by their love of the theater, they stopped the cinema from being sold to real estate developers

Alena Touve | Staff Writer

Since the Violet Crown's opening in 2015, the theater was shown to have a different mission than the other commercial theaters in Charlottesville. While the Violet Crown's program included some of the studio blockbusters shown at Alamo Drafthouse and Regal Stonefield, it also screened independent, arthouse and international films — films which are not often screened at larger cinemas.

This commitment to a more unique catalogue gave the Violet Crown what seemed like a stable niche in the city of Charlottesville. That is, until threats of demolition came crashing down in the fall of 2024.

Heirloom Development, led by Charlottesville resident Jeffrey Levien, proposed a sale of the Violet Crown's real estate, which would allow the building to be razed and turned into a housing complex. In November 2024, Violet Crown management stated publicly that they had no plans to close, but in February 2025, the building's demolition was approved by the city. And while Levien eventually walked away from the demolition contract in May 2025, there were still questions as to whether

the parent company of the Violet Crown, Es Vedra Cinemas, would be able to extend their lease with the current real estate owner, Violet Crown Cinemas, LLC.

As a result, the fate of the Violet Crown remained a mystery — until three local women appeared from behind the scenes.

Rachel Baker, Annie Galvin and Lindsay Meck facilitated the sale of the land containing the Violet Crown to an LLC. Because of this, its operations as a theater will continue for the foreseeable future.

"Rachel and I ... had been discussing the potential demolition for a long time, contemplating what we'd lose if the downtown theater ceased to exist," Galvin said in a written statement to the Cavalier Daily. "So we started almost jokingly talking about saving it."

Brought together by their love of the movie theater, Baker, Galvin and Meck formed a kind of cinema-loving "triumvirate." They began conducting research into the land beneath the theater, speaking to local representatives in a variety of industries to understand if a cinema was truly the best use of the plot. And though Galvin

recognized that the City does need additional housing, she said it became clear during the research process that there were other locations for new developments which would not jeopardize a space they considered so culturally important.

Galvin, Baker and Meck organized the sale of 200 West Main Street to a limited liability company called Lis-sadell, which is publicly managed by Galvin herself. Because the women had also negotiated an extended lease of the physical building by Es Vedra Cinemas, the sale of land was the last step in ensuring the theater's operational future.

Cameron Polson, the Violet Crown's general manager and programmer, was relieved to hear the Violet Crown was officially safe.

"We were thrilled. And not just for our jobs, but ... because Charlottesville can have this independent arthouse theater experience," Polson said. "And that Charlottesville just has people in it who care enough to involve themselves in the community to that point."

Not only would the loss of the Violet Crown have negatively impacted the Charlottesville arts community, it

would have also been missed by ordinary Charlottesville citizens. Chuki Druknya, Charlottesville native and sophomore American University student, was saddened by the possible demolition, as the Violet Crown has been her theater of choice for nearly 10 years. Druknya felt the Violet Crown's subdued decor and simplistic design created the perfect conditions for immersing oneself in a film, without any external distractions.

By offering not only a more curated experience, but a more specific program, the Violet Crown's commitment to the independent niche could be seen as a financial liability. However, Druknya maintained its importance.

"The indie scene [in Charlottesville] is already really small, and then to dedicate thousands of dollars into something that's really small — it's a risk," Druknya said. "But when you do have it there, it is really appreciated, even if it's from a small group of people."

It is not a lack of interest in its program that places cinemas like the Violet Crown in developmental jeopardy. Often, independent films like those shown at the Violet Crown

operate on lower production and distribution budgets than studio blockbusters, making it difficult for them to appear in theaters or turn a large profit when they are given program space. But Polson's Violet Crown believes that money should not dictate a film's success or outreach.

"It's important that these smaller films, and quite often socially important films, can get shown on a big screen to wider audiences, the way they were meant to be seen," Polson said.

Polson also noted the effect that streaming platforms have had on the theatrical model and the film industry as a whole, as streaming's popularity has put movie theaters at financial risk. While that evolution will never be reversed, Galvin, Baker and Meck do not believe that physical cinema should fade away as a result.

"I think we all wish we could have a little more impact and make the world a little bit better," Meck said. "For me, it starts by getting involved in my own backyard. I have learned so much through this adventure, and feel very optimistic about this city. Hopefully, that optimism can inspire others."

How Lighting of the Lawn's design team gets the job done

The group utilizes its artistic and technical skills to bring the University's most festive tradition to life

Matthew Wang | Staff Writer

With cold weather and exams looming on the horizon, students, faculty and the broader Charlottesville community can temporarily escape their troubles with one of the more colorful traditions on Grounds — Lighting of the Lawn. Occurring at the beginning of December, the event features live performances and culminates in a dazzling light show on the Rotunda and across the entire Lawn. This show is made possible by the intricate work of the Lighting of the Lawn's lighting team.

Nearly all aspects of the event are run by students in the Lighting of the Lawn Committee. Unlike the other committees for Lighting of the Lawn, which involve an official application process, new members of the lighting team are usually informally recruited by current members.

Because of this, the number of members changes, but this year there are six students brought together by a passion for lighting design. Third-year Engineering student Will Conrad, a member since his first year, said that they are extremely proud to present

their work to the University.

"I don't think I really grasped how big a deal [Lighting of the Lawn] was when I stepped into it my first year," Conrad said. "It's all very superficial until you see your lights on the Rotunda ... and opposite that are thousands of people you know."

Each Lighting of the Lawn show revolves around a certain theme. This year's theme is Remix: A Quarter Century of Light, which aims to celebrate 25 years of the event by blending old traditions and new ideas.

The light show is tailored to the music, generally a mix of recent and older pop songs. After the songs for Lighting of the Lawn are selected by members of the committee, the design team creates a light show that matches the music. Conrad said that the team plans the logistics and technology throughout the fall semester and hones in on the artistic design the week of LOTL.

During the programming phase, the team arranges the lights as they would be on the Rotunda, allowing them to visualize how the

final show would look. They also use software to model the Rotunda and the lights digitally, ensuring that the show will look exactly as they intend.

As the event evolves, new additions to the show can lead to new challenges for the designers. For instance, last year's Lighting of the Lawn included a special drone show in collaboration with a separate contractor — a first for the event. Third-year College student Daisy Wong said that she often keeps these changes in mind when designing her designs to build cohesion.

"Last year ... it was the first time that instead of doing single songs, it was an actual audio remix," Wong said. "I think I will be considering that experience and trying to remember what it was like, the process of really focusing on the transitions and building a balance."

Creating art with light requires technical know-how. With all forms of technology, there is a risk of failure or malfunction — issues with synchronization, wiring and the program itself could all threat-

en to ruin their efforts. Conrad, however, said that they were not too concerned about those types of problems, like the synchronization issues last year, as they occur extremely rarely.

"The only thing that can really break, I'm glad to say, is our egos," Conrad said. "All of us are concerned about getting it as good as it can be, but I don't think any of us are worried that something will go catastrophically wrong."

Bringing an event as important as Lighting of the Lawn to life is a mammoth feat, one that requires the collaboration of many students. Conrad got involved with Lighting of the Lawn because of his previous experience with lighting for theater productions. However, not every member of the lighting team came from a background in lighting. Wong said that she was invited to join after taking a lighting class with Drama Prof. Lee Kennedy despite not having much prior experience in lighting.

"My lighting design journey completely started at U.Va.," Wong said. "I remember my first year ... watching Lighting of the Lawn and

being fascinated by how magical the event is, in terms of its [ability] to bring people together and have them enjoy a moment that heightens their sensations, both audibly and visually."

When the night of the event finally arrives, the team can put all of their hard work on full display, brightening the Rotunda and pavilions in a dazzling array of lights and colors, as onlookers watch in awe. With their work, the team is able to make a continued impact on the University's student body. Fourth-year College student Ritika Jha said that the event means a lot to her, especially after the tragic events of 2022.

"It's one of my favorite events of the whole year ... even though it's like, really cold, everyone's all together, and I think it's really pretty having the rotunda light up like that," Jha said. "I think being there with all the people you love and coming together as a school ... made me reflect on how lucky I was to have the relationships I had."

OPINION

LEAD EDITORIAL

A president guarded from his constituents cannot lead

Throughout this semester, President Mahoney has failed to productively elevate community concerns and stabilize our University institutionally

It has been almost a semester since Interim University President Paul Mahoney assumed the top role of leadership. Mahoney was placed in this role as a temporary replacement for a beloved former University president and a caretaker of a broken University community. This environment put Mahoney in an unenviable position, situated in a quagmire of an overzealous government, a controversial Board of Visitors and a distrustful University community.

Given the multiplicity of crises, there was much discussion of key priorities for this interim period. Chief among these topics discussed was a restoration of institutional stability and a recommitment to the inclusion of University stakeholders. Yet, Mahoney's reactions throughout this semester lay bare a failure to achieve either aim. It is often said in politics that the success of an administration lies within its first 100 days. 114 days in, Mahoney's interim period in University leadership has failed to address the present concerns of the University community and exacerbated the risk of intractable crises in

the future.

The importance of this assessment on Mahoney's performance is only intensified due to Mahoney's increasing openness to being selected as the permanent president. The development of Mahoney's rhetoric about the position, from initially planning to "get out of the way" to cryptically refusing to comment on his "interest or non-interest," only makes concerns about his leadership more salient.

Admittedly, Mahoney has faced unprecedented circumstances. He entered leadership amidst a gamut of no-confidence votes and calls from the Faculty Senate for Rector Rachel Sheridan and Vice Rector Porter Wilkinson to resign. However, his reaction, or non-reaction, to these crises has shown a lack of awareness of the concerns of the community he is representing. Mahoney's silence fosters the feeling that the University president's office is as absent from community engagement as it would be if the leadership position were never filled.

Mahoney's position throughout his term has been one of deference — defer-

ence that, amidst community protests, denigrates the role of a University president as authentically representing their community. When asked about the Faculty Senate's calls for Sheridan and Wilkinson's resignations, Mahoney's response was that he did not have a response. When asked about calls for the presidential search committee process to be delayed, Mahoney's view was that he had no view. Perhaps the most obvious epitomization of Mahoney's desire to be protected from, rather than to protect, the University community, was his decision to be accompanied by a police guard as he entered the Faculty Senate.

Each of these incidents has placed Mahoney between two University powers — the Board and the University community. Mahoney's consistent deference to the Board serves as an indictment of his ability to empathize with and represent an outraged community in a time of peril.

Mahoney's failures towards the community are obvious not only through his words, but also with his actions. While Mahoney's rejection of the

proposed "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education" reflected community sentiments, his authorization of an agreement with the Justice Department to suspend their investigations into the University only furthered anxiety felt by University stakeholders. Community members were neither included in nor informed of this agreement until it had already been signed, a defining moment which signalled that any claimed care for University members was performative.

Taken together, Mahoney's actions risk creating a new and concerning precedent for what it means to be a university president. In the search process for former University President Jim Ryan, the University's candidate requirements included being an "inspiring leader" who could "motivate relevant constituencies." While these were qualifications that Ryan surpassed, they are responsibilities undermined by Ryan's forced resignation, the agreement signed by Mahoney and his responses to critical events. In this way, rhetoric that devalues the importance of the University community and actions that

denigrate the institutional stability of our University signal a reduced standard to future university presidents.

The responsibility of a University president is profound — as former University Rector Robert Hardie describes, it is the need to be a "servant-leader." As the presidential search process and Mahoney's interim leadership continue unperturbed by deep community concerns, the importance of reaffirming this quality has never been greater. This semester, Mahoney has failed to be an empathetic servant towards our University community. To those candidates for our presidency at other universities and atop our own, do not continue this precedent.

THE CAVALIER DAILY EDITORIAL BOARD is composed of the Executive Editor, the Editor-in-Chief, the two Opinion Editors, two Senior Associates and an Opinion Columnist. The board can be reached at cb@cavalierdaily.com.

HUMOR

Fallen tree outside of Bodo's Bagels victim of TikTok trend

Editor's note: This article is a humor column.

Dec. 2, Charlottesville Police concluded its investigation into the great falling of the tree outside of Bodo's Bagels. Following over a month of interrogation, the primary suspect, Mr. Vom Bunyan — a Vom Mart employee and Charlottesville local — confessed to the crime.

Charlottesville Police commented on the length of the investigation, which took over seven weeks.

"Between keeping the Hill on Scott Stadium at half capacity and conducting the investigation on the false shooting in Shannon, the Bodo's Tree unfortunately fell low on our priority list," the statement read. "But before students go home for winter break, they will now know justice has been served."

The Bodo's tree was discovered on the morning of Oct. 12 by a second-year College student at the University, T.J. O'Tunda.

"It's the biggest and most terrible loss for the University community this year, for sure," O'Tunda re-

marked. "I really can't think of anything that compares."

Following O'Tunda's initial statement, reports from one of the University's most credible news outlets, Yik Yak, described the scene as "horrific" and "saddening."

After the discovery of the tree, Charlottesville Police secured the scene with three pieces of yellow caution tape and retrieved 48 hours of outdoor security footage from Bodo's Bagels' management. Neighboring establishment Vom Mart, however, refused to hand over such footage from their outdoor cameras — when asked, Vom Mart's management claimed that their security system was currently non-functional. In the same conversation, Charlottesville police pointed out a flashing red light on each of Vom Mart's cameras, suggesting that they were working just fine.

In addition to the security footage, Charlottesville Police received an anonymous email containing a screen recording of a video posted on the Vom Mart TikTok account. The video, posted at around 3:09 a.m. on

Oct. 12 shows Vom Mart employee Vom Bunyan engaging in a popular TikTok trend where individuals hang from a crosswalk light and lip-sync to the song "Maui Wowie" by Kid Cudi. According to followers of the Vom Mart TikTok account, the video was only online for an hour before it was taken down, which Charlottesville Police cited as the reason why the investigation took as long as it did.

As opposed to a crosswalk light, however, Bunyan can be seen hanging on a branch of the Bodo's tree. In the last second of the video, the tree begins to fall as Bunyan swings off the branch.

After scrubbing through the footage, Charlottesville Police discovered more visual evidence that Bunyan participated in the trend and a complete video of the tree toppling down. Just moments after the tree falls, Bunyan can be seen staring blankly at the debris, checking his surroundings and then fleeing back into the Vom Mart store. Even more incriminating, the next video posted on the Vom Mart TikTok account was to the song

"Timber" by Pitbull featuring Kesha.

When questioned about the incident, Bunyan claimed that the video was AI-generated and that he did not have access to the Vom Mart TikTok account. During the same meeting, however, Bunyan accidentally clicked on the profile page and revealed that he was in fact logged in to the account.

Despite continuous efforts to maintain his innocence, Bunyan confessed to the crime Nov. 27. Having had almost seven weeks to contemplate the entirety of their investigation and giving residents space to mourn the loss, the Charlottesville Police gave its final statement on the case to the community.

"We are happy to have brought justice to the tree outside of Bodo's Bagels and closure to all Bodo's customers. Although we are now entering the hellish pits of winter and that outdoor seating is losing utility, we hope that the Charlottesville community is comforted knowing that the case has been resolved."

Bodo's manager, Chive

McSchmear, also released a statement on the tragedy following the investigation's conclusion.

"We are mourning the loss of our beloved tree, especially since it meant that our customers did not get to enjoy its fall colors," McSchmear said. "However, the tragedy has brought more customers in. They stop by to give their condolences and end up purchasing four pity bagels and a small orange juice."

Student movements to plant a new tree in the Bodo's tree's place have popped up around Grounds and show no signs of slowing down. While opposers of the movement think the space should remain empty in respect of the original tree, proponents of a new tree argue that a month and a half of mourning a literal tree is enough.

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Spanberger cannot fail Virginia's education system

Gov.-elect Abigail Spanberger promised to fix Virginia schools. Now she has to prove it.

Virginia has been in need of a governor who will do more than make empty promises about fixing the state's education system. With Gov.-elect Abigail Spanberger's victory, there is hope of approaching the end of an exhausting educational decline — supporting teachers, boosting resources and modernizing assessments. But hope alone does not fix schools. For Spanberger to successfully reshape education in Virginia and establish herself as a results-driven governor, she must translate her campaign commitments on education policy into concrete action, resisting the ongoing politicization of childhood education.

While vowing change is uncomplicated, providing tangible improvements is much more challenging — especially in a state that has been plagued by years of educational decline. Virginia's education system remains strained, reeling from the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Education Recovery Scorecard — a project from professors at Stanford University and Harvard University that analyzes post-2019 efforts to return to optimal academic scores using National Assessment of Educational Progress scores — Virginia ranks 41st in reading recovery and 51st in math recovery.

The Scorecard compares 42 states and Washington, D.C. This starkly contrasts with Virginia's NAEP scores before the pandemic, which ranked higher than the national average.

Spanberger, therefore, is not inheriting momentum, but rather a system that is still trying to regain stability and return to the higher-than-average NAEP scores Virginia achieved before the pandemic. However, she

took office in a similar manner, with the goal of empowering parents and restoring excellence in Virginia's schools. And while he expanded portions of the state's education budget and signed the Virginia Literacy Act, his tenure also sowed deepening doubts surrounding the public education system. Youngkin's administration struggled in offering support to teachers, stoked parental anxieties

diverting funding away from voucher programs and resisting efforts to privatize public education. That plan will lose integrity if it becomes just the political antithesis of Youngkin for politicization's sake without substantial change. A meaningful change in public school education does not just materialize from a simple slogan that says "no" to privatization, but rather, a demonstration of why pub-

learning levels.

These drawbacks are not to undermine Spanberger's optimism, but rather, to highlight similar policy errors that have set Virginia back before. If Virginians are ever going to trust the public school education system again, then the system must be deserving of that trust. The Spanberger administration must focus on tangible results, true transparency and accountability. Children's education cannot be just another pawn in the political sphere. Spanberger, therefore, must be willing to defend her plans even when they become politically inconvenient.

Gov.-elect Spanberger, do not let your education plan collect dust once the campaign confetti settles. Do not use education as a weapon that leaves students as collateral. Do not be just another governor who talks about fixing Virginia's public education — be the governor who actually succeeds.

If there is one lesson Spanberger should take from Youngkin's term, it is to view his actions as a counterexample, rather than a blueprint."

appears to recognize the weight of that responsibility. One of her central campaign promises outlines a comprehensive roadmap for the state's recovery — addressing teacher shortages, modernizing schools, increasing support for students with disabilities and more. From the outside, this list seems poised to reset, rebuild and reinvigorate classrooms in Virginia — improving educational standards for children while also restoring constituents' trust in the system as a whole.

These promises, though, look similar to past gubernatorial terms. Outgoing Gov. Glenn Youngkin

and shifted the focus from systemic improvement toward ideological battles. On paper, his agenda made some progress. In reality, though, academic recovery post-pandemic lagged dramatically, achievement gaps widened and education became more of a culture war than a learning mission.

If there is one lesson Spanberger should take from Youngkin's term, it is to view his actions as a counterexample, rather than a blueprint. To rebuild the education system, she must not let her policies devolve into the next battleground of the partisan culture war. Take Spanberger's stance on

lic schools deserve investment.

Another potential pitfall is Spanberger's plan to uphold academic excellence by modernizing the Standards of Learning assessments. While ambitious on the surface, updating assessments needs to be matched with updates to resources and time to implement these changes. Spanberger has gestured toward these priorities, but materializing them into real reforms is imperative. Without those changes, the SOL assessments will be better suited to gauge how well students can withstand another policy misstep rather than measuring their

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Albemarle's approach to data centers should be a model

Albemarle County's decision to hold off on data center construction until both acquiring more information and the requisite energy capacity is a welcome example of prudence

What the pick and shovel industry was to the California gold rush, data centers are to the artificial intelligence boom. Investment in data centers and their ancillary industries has accounted for the vast majority of United States' GDP growth during the first half of 2025, with much of this investment heavily concentrated in Virginia. Although the majority of the 667 data centers that have been constructed in the state reside in Northern Virginia, multiple surrounding counties in Virginia have begun to consider regulations surrounding data centers.

Albemarle County recently made the prudent decision to hold off on modifying the existing "phase one" zoning regulations for data centers, which requires special use permits in data centers exceeding 40,000 square feet in the industrial district. Hyper-scale and enterprise-sized data centers, the ones that cause the most adverse effects on a community, frequently exceed this size limit, and as such, the existing regulations have resulted in no current proposals for any large-scale data center.

Drafting the proposal for phase two of the zoning plan for data centers was meant to create more comprehen-

sive regulation that would not require special use permits across the county. As this growth continues across the state, Albemarle County should remain steadfast in their position against rapid and unsupervised expansion of data centers, serving as a model of prudence in decision-making to

seemed like an obvious economic boon. Construction of data centers provides employment opportunities for around 1,500 workers per center. However, this number is only for the initial construction phase, and full-time employment opportunities decrease once operations begin. The

suffering, or did not exist in the first place — characteristics that Albemarle County does not possess. Albemarle County does not need to gamble on economic expansion through data centers when it already has a thriving economy.

If Albemarle County's Board of

construction — its adverse effect on environments, both locally and globally. Local consequences include water shortages, increased strain on the utility grid, light pollution, increased utility prices and air pollution, to give a non-exhaustive list. Globally, this demand for energy has catalyzed an increase in natural gas and oil usage. While Albemarle County's decision to hold off will have little effect on the global aggregate of environmental disruption, they have avoided a litany of closer to home impacts.

Albemarle County's Board of Supervisors has made the right decision in reserving judgment. For future deliberation within Albemarle County, data center construction should not be considered owing to the simple fact that its costs outweigh its potential benefits. The promise of environmental damage, along with almost certain changes to its landscape, outweigh the positive economic impact that could occur from their creation.

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Growing demand for increased access to energy has resulted in a need for vastly increased energy capacity, producing a bottleneck that providers cannot solve quickly enough."

similar county governments.

Growing demand for increased access to energy has resulted in a need for vastly increased energy capacity, producing a bottleneck that providers cannot solve quickly enough. Data centers hum along to the tune of four percent of total American power expenditure and 26 percent of Virginia's. This has led to many providers opening or reopening of natural gas and coal plants. In Virginia, Dominion Energy recently announced plans to construct new gas power plants.

At a first glance, the introduction of data centers to Albemarle Coun-

usual operational state of a data center requires roughly 50 individuals to maintain hardware and software performance, along with on-site duties. In sum, the economic growth promised by construction has only a short-term effect on employment.

By most economic metrics, Albemarle County is a healthy county. The unemployment rate is almost an entire percentage point lower than the national average of 4.4 percent, along with a median household income of around \$102,000. An influx of data centers seems to help reinvigorate local economies that were previously

Supervisors had recklessly gone full steam ahead with plans to remove barriers to data center construction, they would have almost certainly assisted in placing an untenable load on the utility network of the county. It currently does not have the energy capacity to support large-scale data center campuses. The Board exercised careful judgement, understanding that regardless of whether or not they wanted data centers, it simply is not possible right now.

Major causes of concern in most data center proposals are due to the negative externalities of data center

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