

# VIRGINIA

WINTER 2021

**VOX ALUMNI**

SPECIAL REPORT

# SURVEY SAYS

Alumni views about **UVA** may surprise you



UVA athletes cash in, sort of  
Q&A with the enrollment chief  
Trax look-back

PUBLISHED BY  **UVA ALUMNI**

**VOX ALUMNI**

**SPECIAL REPORT**

**LONGITUDINAL  
&  
ATTITUDES  
STUDY**



**We mapped the views of alumni across a 50-year timeline of class years. The results should deepen your understanding. They may also upend it.** *By Richard Gard*

**It can be tempting** to make assumptions about the views of University of Virginia alumni—that by and large they're rock-ribbed in their support of the Honor System, unflinching in their defense of Thomas Jefferson, and wistful in their remembrance of the professors who changed their lives; that older alumni are political conservatives, younger alumni liberals and, ask any of them, that UVA was a heckuva lot more fun back in the day.

Some of those stereotypes have elements of truth. Most get more wrong than right. None begins to capture the values and perspectives of UVA's 250,000 living alumni. We can say this because we conducted a survey of undergraduate alumni in August and September to test these and other assumptions.

It's the inaugural project of Vox Alumni, a multifaceted Alumni Association initiative aimed at developing a more contoured understanding of alumni views and concerns and, in turn, sharing the resulting insights with you and University leaders.

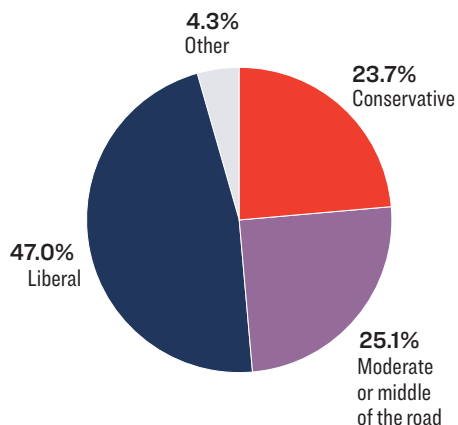
For this first foray, we kept things broad. We surveyed across a range of topics on the student experience (such as professors and social life) and on present-day perceptions (the state of Honor, the founder's proper place). Critical to the quest for contour, we mapped responses across a 50-year continuum of class years, sampling classes five years apart—1970, 1975, 1980, and so on through 2020. We analyzed the timeline to see how, and when, attitudes have shifted over time, and which values have transcended it. →

For a sidebar analysis, we also surveyed the Class of 2019, the last pre-pandemic Wahoos. We used them as a benchmark to test for a possible COVID effect on the school spirit of the graduates who came after them, the Class of 2020. It's a phenomenon larger than UVA, of course, as were the generational and ideological differences that came through in the survey. As particular as we made our survey to the idiosyncrasies of the University, the findings could well inform larger conversations taking place in higher ed.

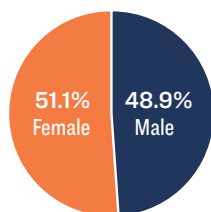
In developing the survey, and in analyzing the results, we consulted with Kara Fitzgibbon, director of the Center for Survey Research within UVA's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service. We averaged 110 participants per class, 1,319 in total, representing a 5.3 percent response rate. The survey carries a +/-2.7 percent margin of error overall at the 95 percent level of confidence.

## The composite

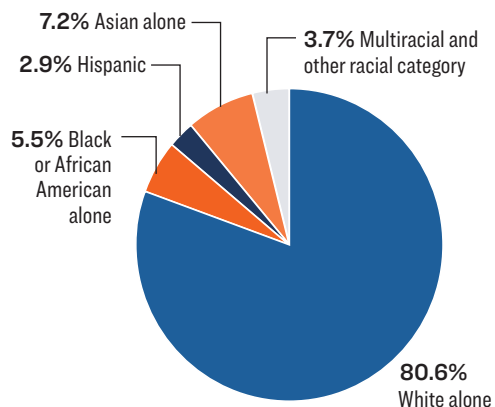
### Political orientation of respondents



### Gender of respondents



### Race, ethnicity of respondents



NOTE: Proportions shown reflect those who answered the question. Though we invited respondents to offer alternative descriptions, none of those identifiers was statistically significant to be included here.



## Feeling the Love, Measuring It

For all the multipart questions we dished out, all the gradations of scoring we imposed, all the hot-button topics we placed in their paths, participants consistently found ways to express their deep and abiding love of UVA. When we asked them to rate their overall student experience, 94 percent selected a score of “favorable” or “highly favorable,” global positivity. When we asked the more complicated question of how they viewed present-day UVA, the positive response came to a stout 82 percent, with the gap between past experience and present perception wider the longer ago the class year, an early indicator of some of the generational disagreement that showed up elsewhere in the survey.

A particularly revealing question asked alumni to assess how today's UVA is doing in 18 different areas. For each, we gave them three choices: UVA needs to do more, UVA goes too far, or UVA gets it right. It was our Goldilocks question, only instead of applying it to hot or cold porridge, we took their temperature on things like “maintaining academic rigor” and “striving for athletic competitiveness,” and on more fraught propositions, like “honoring Thomas Jefferson,” paired with a separate line item for “viewing Jefferson more critically.” We tossed participants a similarly two-sided coin that asked them to assess UVA’s “openness to considering conservative ideas” and, separately, “openness to considering progressive ideas.”

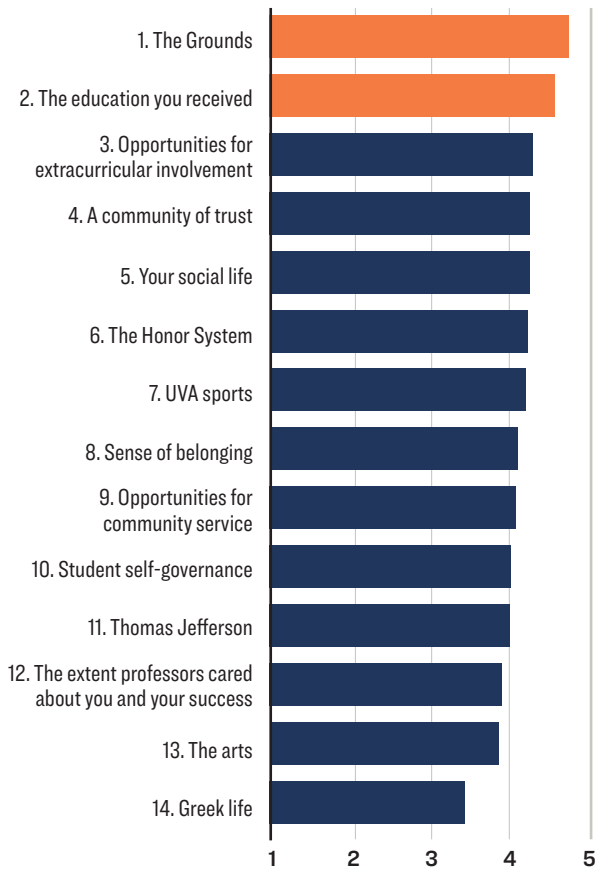
For 14 out of the 18 topics, majorities said “UVA gets it right.” Even for the four remaining topics, a plurality concurred in UVA’s current approach.

Our question listing various elements of the student experience returned the least surprising answers of the survey—and one of the most surprising. We asked participants to rank 14 different aspects of student life on a 5-point scale, from highly favorable down to highly unfavorable. Getting the highest mean score among the class years, at 4.74, was the Grounds. Of course it was. A similarly predictable and reaffirming second, at 4.56, was “the education you received.”

What should have logically followed from that didn't. Those special professor-student mentorships, long regarded as a key ingredient in the UVA secret sauce, turned out to be, to mix metaphors and menu items, a nothing burger.

# By the numbers

**When you look back at your time as a student, how favorably do you remember the following aspects of UVA life?**  
Average favorability score on a scale of 1-5

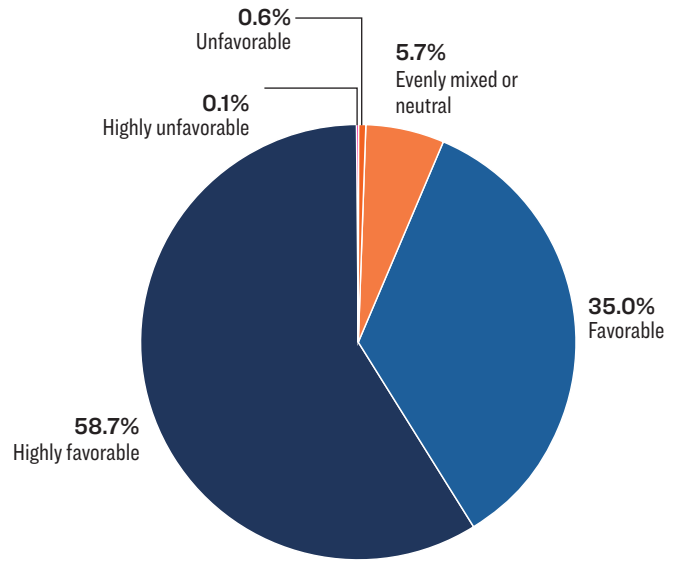


“Professors who cared about you and your success” ranked 12th on our list of 14 at 3.90, barely above the arts and, in last place, Greek life, which only about a third of our sample would have experienced directly anyway. That’s not to say those legends of the classroom, renowned for caring about their students outside its walls, too, don’t make up a valued part of the student experience. They just had to take their place toward the back of the line.

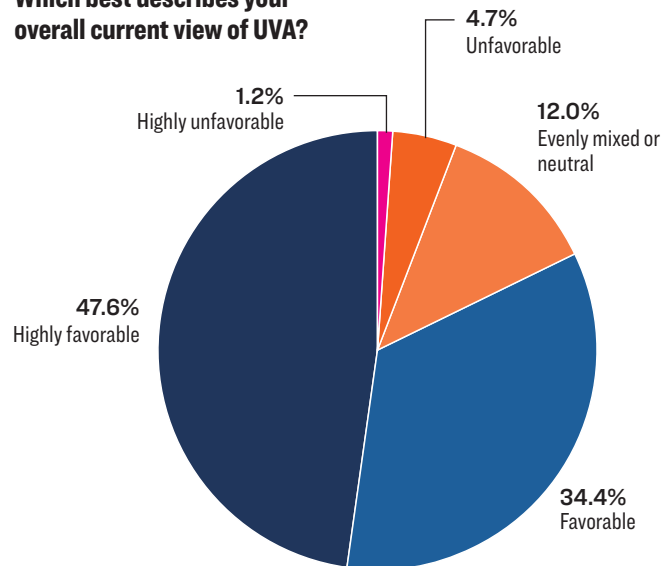
Something else unexpected in the survey: student social life—specifically that today’s students have one, and that it can more than hold its own against the bygone Easters era. We included the question in the survey to test the hypothesis that as UVA has gotten more selective, academic and career pressures more intense, and the zeitgeist more serious, that the good times would have to give. The survey’s more recent graduates crushed that theory like an empty beer can.

Forty-three percent of the older cohort (1990 and earlier) remember their social lives highly favorably, vs. a

**Which best describes your overall experience as a UVA student?**



**Which best describes your overall current view of UVA?**



slightly higher 47 percent among more recent graduates. Combine “highly favorably” with plain “favorably,” and the responses jump to 83 percent for older alumni, vs. a still higher 86 percent for younger ones.

An important landmark in the results: Throughout the survey, the early 1990s seemed to be the continental divide in sensibilities, with alumni from 1970 through 1990 generally tending toward one side of an issue and those from 1995 through 2020 leaning toward the other. Bear in mind, too, that the more recent cohort represents a larger portion of the alumni population than do the earlier classes, almost twice as large, class sizes having more than tripled since 1970.

On to more difficult subject matter. On to Honor.



## Honor's Long Slide

**When we set out to survey** on the Honor System, we suspected we might detect a decline in passion among the most recent classes. We didn't expect to see a 50-year decline.

The trend line of those remembering Honor as a highly favorable aspect of their student experience starts at a peak of 78 percent within our sampling of the Class of 1970. Then it heads down the slope, shedding several percentage points with the Class of 1975 and several more with 1980. When it schusses past that critical 1990 gate, highly favorable dips below 50 percent and continues its descent, into the 40s, then the 30s, before bottoming at 20 percent among the Class of 2020.

Combining “highly favorable” with “favorable” bolsters Honor's performance across the class years but doesn't reverse the downward trend. A nearly unanimous 96 percent of the Class of 1970 consider the Honor System a positive part of their student experience. That

tapers over 50 years to 51 percent, a slim majority of goodwill among the Class of 2020.

The survey indicated a political dynamic to how one regards the Honor System, whether looking back to student days or appraising the present. We asked

respondents if they'd be comfortable telling us their political orientation, and more than 98 percent obliged. The older classes have the highest percentages of self-described conservatives (we offered choices of “slightly conservative,” “conservative” and “very conservative”)—but

liberals (similarly offered three shades of intensity) outnumber them in every cohort of the survey, including the earliest, except for the Class of 1985. The Class of 1970 identifies as 37 percent conservative and 38 percent liberal. That one-point gap widens considerably along the survey's timeline, with liberals claiming increasingly larger majorities starting in 2005.

Overall, the survey results showed this half-century span of alumni to consist of 47 percent liberals, 24 percent conservatives, 25 percent self-described (and self-defined) moderates, and 4 percent other, a grab bag that included different varieties of libertarians, alternatively fiscal and social conservatives, classical liberals, progressives who eschewed the term “liberal,” a socialist, a communist, and a self-proclaimed Jeffersonian.

Overlaying right and left affiliations onto our Honor System questions showed the Honor System's strong conservative appeal. Sixty-seven percent of conservatives considered the Honor System a highly favorable part of their student life, compared with 41 percent of liberals. Combining “highly favorable” with “favorable” brings the political rivals closer together; 89 percent of conservatives consider the Honor System to have been a positive part of their student experience, as do 76 percent of liberals.

Ultimately, views came down to priorities. For our Goldilocks questions—UVA needs to do more, goes too far, or gets it right—we asked respondents to indicate how important a subject area was for UVA to get right. When we ranked results by each topic's mean score (averaging the full range of answers from highly important to not important on a scale of 1 to 5), older and younger alumni agreed on the top three priorities—maintain academic rigor first (4.80), encourage a sense of ethics and integrity second (4.70), and create a community of trust third (4.59).

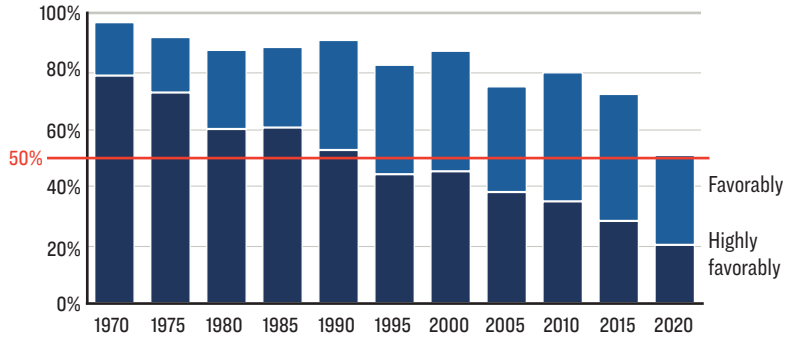
It's the fourth priority where the generations diverged. The older classes, 1970 through 1990, rallied around upholding the Honor System as No. 4. The more recent classes, 1995 through 2020, relegated it to No. 8. The No. 4 priority for the under-50 crowd: “Fostering student work/life balance, general well-being.” Older alumni dropped that to sixth place.

Our query about the importance of UVA's “Working toward diversity, equity, and inclusion,” known as DEI, produced the biggest disparity in rank-order priorities between older and younger classes. The more recent classes put that at No. 6, based on mean scores. The less recent cohort dispatched it to No. 13 on the list of 18. In fact, if you chart the “highly important” scores for upholding the Honor System and DEI along the same class-year axis, the inversely related trend lines etch a giant X of disagreement. Honor, as a priority, starts at 82 percent for

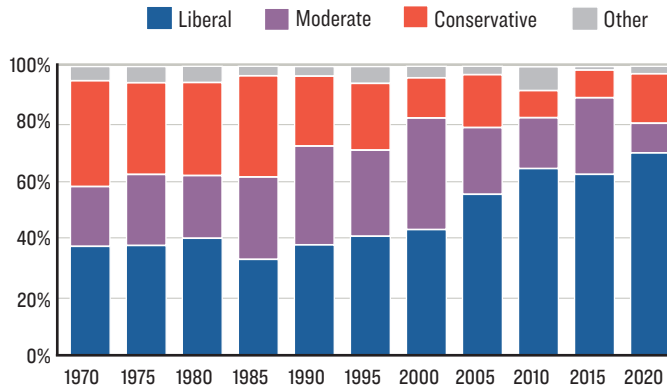
### We want to hear from you.

To comment on this story or any other aspect of the Vox Alumni initiative, please contact us at [vox-alumni@virginia.edu](mailto:vox-alumni@virginia.edu).

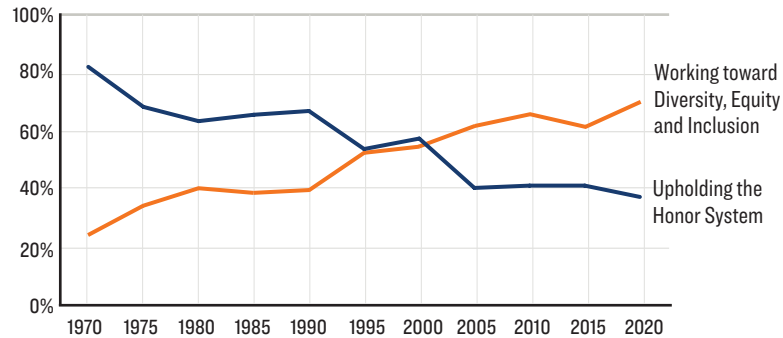
**When you look back at your time as a student, how favorably do you remember the Honor System?**



**How would you describe your political orientation?**

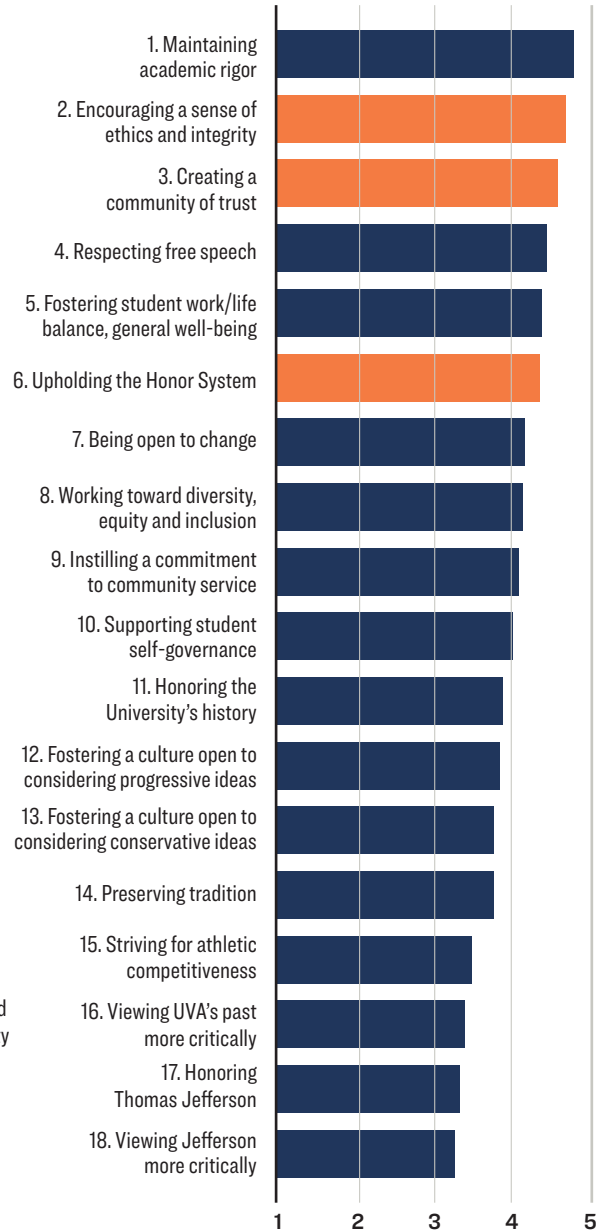


**Percentage of class that says it's highly important that UVA get this right**



**For each area, please rate how important you think it is that UVA get it right.**

Average importance score on a scale of 1-5



the 1970 cohort and plummets to 37 percent for 2020; DEI starts at 24 percent high importance for 1970 and climbs to 70 percent among the 2020 group. It's a study in diverging generational sensibilities.

Another takeaway: Support for the ideals of Honor has never flagged. The breakdown occurs when you start talking about the regulatory apparatus charged with fulfilling them, "the System." Our polling on the importance of "ethics and integrity" and "community of trust" was just

a surrogate means of asking about the Honor System without mentioning it by name. Those concepts are, after all, the defining principles of UVA Honor and, again, the No. 2 and No. 3 priority vote-getters, close behind maintaining academic standards. But pose the question as "Upholding the Honor System," and its support drops to sixth place. Such a cognitive chasm between Honor's ideals and its operations, between the mission and the machinery, would seem to indicate issues beyond semantics.



# The Jefferson Regression

**Views of Jefferson generally correlate** to graduation era and, in turn, the prevailing Jefferson scholarship of the time, following the trend an earlier *Virginia Magazine* story (Winter 2019) called “The Jefferson Progression.” The downward slope of Jefferson’s favorability scores among the class years presents a Jefferson regression.

Class years 1970 to 1985 give Jefferson the largest percentages of highly favorable scores in our student-experience questions. That coincides with the dominance of Dumas Malone and Merrill D. Peterson in the field and on the history faculty, eminent biographers and proponents of the public Jefferson, the founding father and great statesman. By the Class of 1990, as a more critical assessment of Jefferson continued to gain scholarly and popular sway, highly favorable was no longer the majority alumni view. UVA would soon become a leading center of that approach with the 1993 arrival of Peter S. Onuf, who succeeded Peterson as holder of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation chair in the history department. Jefferson’s “highly favorable” score takes a dramatic drop with the Class of 2005. They took their degrees during the reappraisal of Jefferson that gained momentum in the years after the 1998

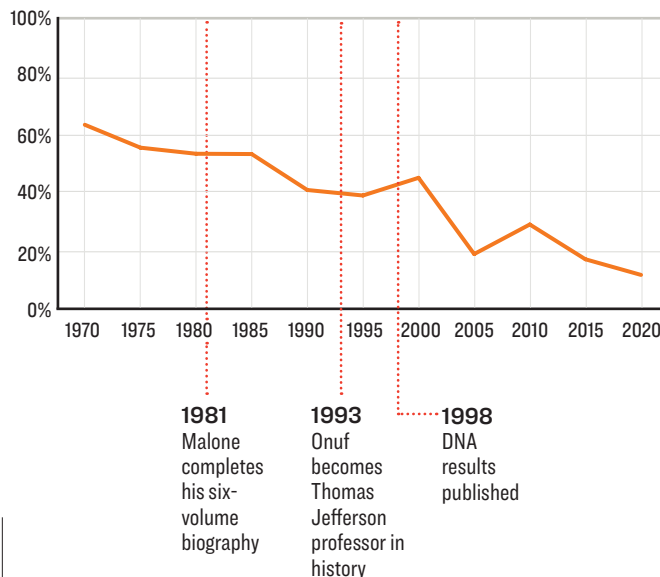
publication of DNA results that, coupled with a growing body of circumstantial evidence, made Jefferson’s paternity of his enslaved servant Sally Hemings’ children the widely accepted view.

Jefferson produced the starkest racial divide in the survey. Only 24 percent of African American respondents regard him as a positive aspect of their college experience, compared with



Read more about historians’ evolving views of Thomas Jefferson at [uvamag.com/jeffersonprogression](http://uvamag.com/jeffersonprogression)

Percentage of each class that remembered Thomas Jefferson highly favorably



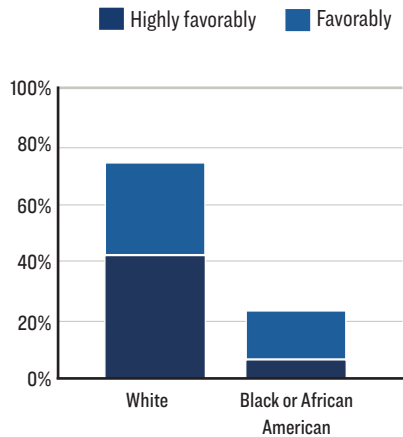
75 percent of white alumni. The two groups moved closer together when we inquired about present-day UVA’s honoring of Thomas Jefferson. Majorities of both Black and white alumni agreed that the University “gets it right.” They disagreed about viewing Jefferson more critically. Sixty percent of Black alumni said UVA needs to do more. About half of white respondents said UVA gets things right, with the other half almost evenly divided between whether UVA needs to do more or goes too far. We should note that only 62 participants identified as Black alone, which is a relatively small count, but all reported relationships were still found to be statistically significant at the 95 percent level of confidence.

Similar to the pattern we saw with the Honor System, views of the founder break down along political lines. In our student experience set of questions, 68 percent of conservatives remember Jefferson as a highly favorable aspect of their student life, vs. 22 percent of liberals. Combining “highly favorable” with “favorable” rallies the conservatives to 93 percent positivity, compared with 55 percent for liberals.

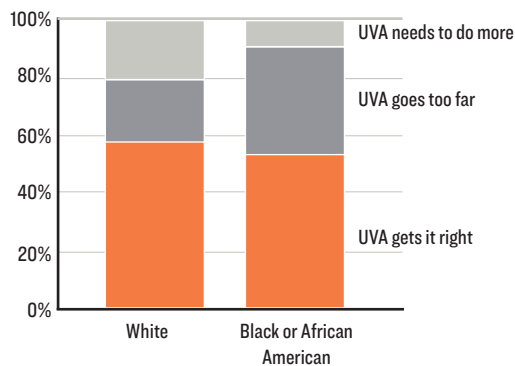
That question whether UVA needs to do more (or goes too far) in “honoring Thomas Jefferson,” rendered more muted political differences. Close to half of conservatives, 45 percent, agree with the 57 percent of liberals who say that UVA gets honoring Thomas Jefferson right. It’s the remainder who sharply disagree, with 52 percent of conservatives (generally those closer to the “very conservative” pole) saying UVA needs to do more and 40 percent of liberals (also generally the hard-core ideologues) saying UVA goes too far.



**How favorably do you remember Thomas Jefferson as an aspect of UVA life?**



**How well is UVA doing in honoring Thomas Jefferson?**



We evoked slightly sharper disagreement when we posed the corollary proposition, asking how UVA is doing in “viewing Jefferson more critically.” Fifty-seven percent of conservatives said UVA goes too far here, which 49 percent of liberals countered by saying UVA needs to do more. This was one of those four out of 18 areas of the survey where UVA fell short of getting a majority willing to say that it gets things right.

Still, a plurality, a coalition among 47 percent of the liberals, 37 percent of the conservatives and more than half of everyone else, approve of UVA’s current posture. And just about everyone participating in the survey agrees that mediating how best to regard Thomas Jefferson ranks at the bottom of the priorities list. Only 14 percent of all political persuasions combined consider viewing Jefferson more critically as something highly important for UVA to get right, last on our list of 18. The glass-half-full version of that question, about the importance of honoring Jefferson, finished second to last.



# Left and Right

We used the survey’s Goldilocks questions to probe perceptions about UVA’s ideological open-mindedness, a subject of fierce concern among higher education critics and an impetus behind the University’s newly adopted principles of free speech and academic freedom. We asked alumni for their impression of UVA’s openness to considering conservative ideas and, in a tandem question, its openness to progressive ideas.

We struck a nerve. On our list of 18 topics, openness to conservative ideas ranked as the No. 1 area where UVA needs to do more, though that wasn’t the prevailing view on the subject. Consistent with other survey patterns, it is of greater concern among the older classes than the younger: An average 55 percent across the class years 1970 to 1990 want UVA to be more hospitable to ideas on the right—but as many as 32 percent of the 1995 to 2020 cohort agreed with them. It made for an average of 42 percent saying UVA tilts too far left.

That view persisted in the comments section of the survey, including the dozen-plus instances of alumni articulating their frustration through various conjugations of the word “woke.” That said, a silent plurality of 47 percent assesses “openness to conservative ideas” as one more endeavor that UVA gets right.

Openness to progressive ideas polled as the No. 1 area where UVA goes too far, but the passions didn’t show up as strongly. Forty-three percent of the older classes say UVA needs to rein in its progressivism, joined by 18 percent of the younger cohort, contributing to an average of 30 percent saying UVA goes too far. Among the more recent class years, “gets it right” is the predominant view, racking up 63 percent affirmation. And that’s the majority view across all classes, accumulating 56 percent support.

**Being open to conservative ideas ranked as the No. 1 area where UVA needs to do more, yet that wasn’t the prevailing view.**



# Minority Experience

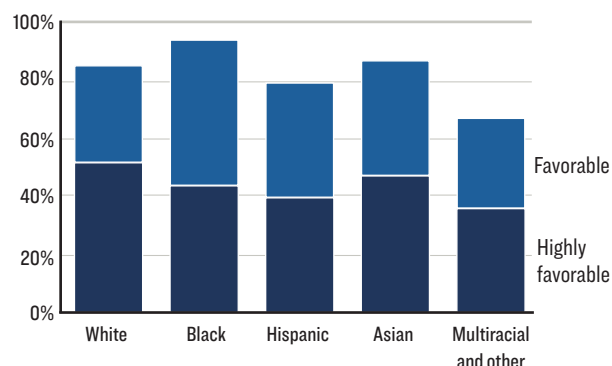
**Our participant pool was** 81 percent white, 6 percent Black, 3 percent Hispanic, 7 percent Asian and 4 percent multiracial or other. Though within margin-of-error and statistical confidence tolerances, the minority categories had relatively low headcounts.

All racial and ethnic alumni groups view present-day UVA favorably, with Black alumni at the high end, 94 percent saying they view the University favorably or highly favorably, compared with 85 percent of white alumni. Multiracial alumni fell at the low end with 67 percent positivity. When we compared just the top rating of highly favorable, it rendered an 8-point gap between the bullishness of white alumni at 51 percent and all others at 43 percent.

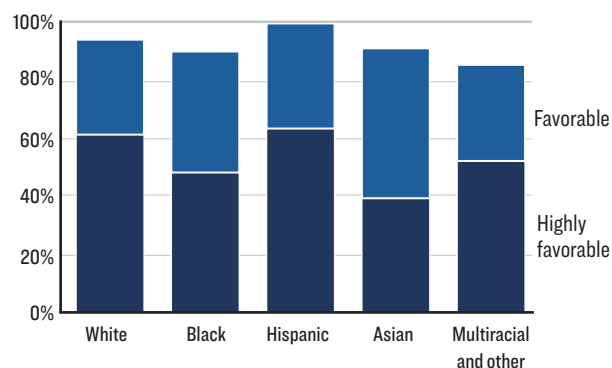
A similar pattern emerged when we surveyed alumni on how they remember their student experience. Among minority alumni, 90 percent of Black alumni, 91 percent of Asian alumni and 100 percent of Hispanic alumni rated their overall student experience as favorable or highly favorable, compared with 94 percent of white alumni. But minority alumni were less inclined to give out the top grade of “highly favorable.” Compared with the 62 percent of white and 64 percent of Hispanic alumni who remember college life highly favorably, only 48 percent of African American and 40 percent of Asian alumni were willing to go that far. Fifty-two percent of alumni who identified as multiracial or other opted for “highly favorable.”

When we asked about sense of belonging as UVA students, the survey showed high positivity but also racial disparity. Eighty-two percent of white alumni rated their sense of fitting in highly favorably or favorably, vs. 71 percent for the other categories combined. Asian alumni had the lowest percentage of a highly favorable sense of belonging at 22 percent, whites the highest at 38 percent. In between are multiracial alumni at 33 percent and Black alumni at 29 percent.

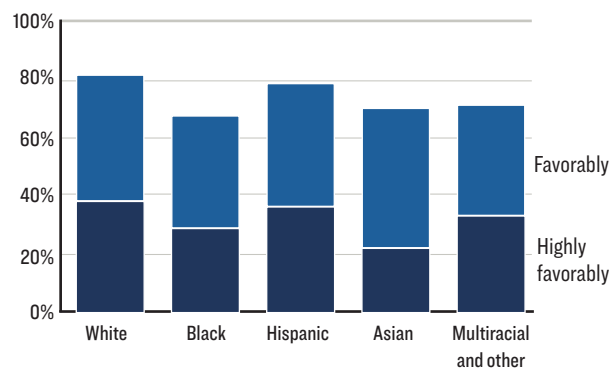
What best describes your overall current view of UVA?



What best describes your overall experience as a UVA student?



How favorably do you remember your sense of belonging?





## Women at UVA

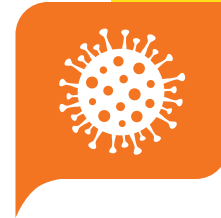
**A year ago** *Virginia Magazine* devoted a special issue (Fall 2020) to the story of coeducation at UVA—the 1969 lawsuit that stopped the foot-dragging on granting women full undergraduate admission, some of the hostility undergraduate women faced during those first few years, and the fairly rapid ramp-up to enrolling equal numbers of men and women. Echoes of that history showed up when we analyzed survey results by gender, women making up 51 percent of our statistical sample.

Women from the Class of 1970, who wouldn't have had benefit of the federal court order, and so whose undergraduate presence was limited, registered a 55 percent positive sense of belonging, compared with 85 percent for men. That deficit narrows substantially by 1975, with 75 percent of women saying they felt a sense of belonging, vs. their male counterparts' 85 percent. By the Class of 1980, women's favorable sense of belonging exceeded men's, as it did in four of the eight class years surveyed from 1985 through 2020. We need to disclose, however, only the Class of 1970's observed gender differences are statistically significant. While patterns were observed in subsequent years within the survey data, these relationships were not statistically significant, likely due in part to the small subgroup sizes, a result of dicing the data by both year and gender.

More confidently, we can report that female alumni are majority liberal, 58 percent of them choosing that description, compared with 38 percent of men. Only 18 percent of women identified themselves as conservative, vs. 29 percent of men. Those differences between the sexes showed up in a few places in our question about priorities, what's highly important for UVA to get right. Sixty-two percent of women, for example, championed the high importance of DEI, vs. 39 percent of men. Twenty-one percent of women stressed the need to view Thomas Jefferson more critically, vs. 9 percent of men.

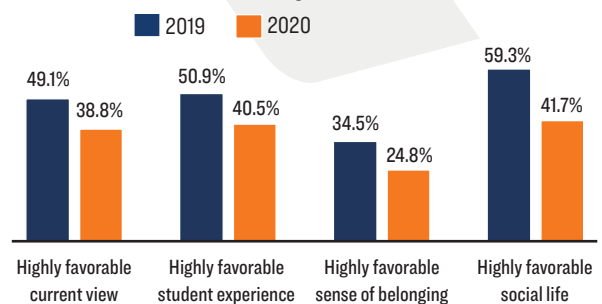
Women also accord higher importance than men to UVA's ensuring student well-being and work-life balance, 63 percent of them elevating that topic, compared with 41 percent of men.

**Women who responded were majority liberal, 58 percent of them choosing that description, compared with 38 percent of men. Only 18 percent of women identified themselves as conservative, vs. 29 percent of men.**



## Testing for COVID

**The COVID Enthusiasm Gap**



**The most recent class** in our survey, 2020, had a markedly different fourth year from its predecessors. COVID-19 all but banished them from the classroom, canceled March Madness, left it to the postal service to confer their degrees, and delayed their commencement walk of the Lawn by a year. To gauge the effect those events might have had on their school spirit, we surveyed the Class of 2019, the last pre-COVID class.

Not surprising, and not unique to UVA, the survey verified a significant, across-the-board enthusiasm deficit from 2019 to 2020:

- a 10-point drop in the highly favorable percentages for their student experience, 41 percent vs. 51 percent
- a 10-point drop in a highly favorable view of present-day UVA, 39 percent vs. 49 percent
- a 10-point drop in highly favorable scores for sense of belonging, 25 percent vs. 35 percent
- a 17-point drop in highly favorable social life percentages, 42 percent vs. 59 percent

Neither the 2021 nor 2022 classes escaped the COVID force field either, so the results from 2020 speak to the accumulating longer-term challenges of keeping the newest generation of alumni fully engaged with UVA. On the other hand, the fact that 42 percent managed to maintain a highly favorable social life in the grips of a global pandemic may speak volumes about their resilient spirit. 📍

*Richard Gard is the editor of Virginia Magazine.*