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Facing its Lowest Enrollment Levels in Over 40 Years and Resulting Drop in Revenues, UVI Calls on Senate to Fund Larger Budget

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University of the Virgin Islands logo at the entrance of the Albert A. Sheen Campus on St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The University of the Virgin Islands has asked senators in the Committee on Finance to consider granting it a total budget funding of \$39.1 million for fiscal year 2023, to help support its operational costs which have been unfavorably impacted by low student enrollment and other external factors.

The figure includes an additional \$2,324,260, which the university's president Dr. David Hall says is needed to pay increases in the Government Employees' Retirement System (GERS)

contributions, health insurance premium increases, and property insurance increases after the hurricanes. The monies would replace Covid-19 funding that the university was receiving but which it says had all been expended.

On Tuesday, Mr. Hall told lawmakers that with just one week before school reopens, only 1,320 students have registered at the institution. It is a significant decline from the 2,400 students who attended UVI prior to the 2017 hurricane season. "The hurricanes took about 500 students from us; free tuition brought us back up the first year we implemented it but then the pandemic has eroded those numbers down to where we are."

Overtime, the president said the university witnessed a further decline during the pandemic, with only 1,656 students enrolling last year. That decline in student enrollment is [attributed to the university's mandatory vaccination policy](#) which prohibits in-person classes for unvaccinated students and teachers.

Even so, Mr. Hall said the university's board is not immediately prepared to remove that policy, acknowledging that there are still risks associated with contracting and spreading Covid-19.

UVI's Covid-19 strategy in August 2021 [was aggressive](#), mandating vaccination for students who wanted to participate in in-person learning. At the time, only 418 of UVI's 2,000 students had either received their first or second dose of a Covid-19 vaccine at the deadline, portending a crisis for the institution.

The contentious policy, which was revealed to the public in August 2021 but approved during a June 2021 board meeting, offered no leeway. If students chose not to get vaccinated and were denied exemption on religious or medical grounds, they had to find "other means," which Mr. Hall clarified to the Consortium during an interview were UVI online options, or another university to complete their education. The selfsame scenario was in effect for staff as well.

In June of this year, UVI [updated its policy](#) to allow students who are not vaccinated to attend in-person classes, though these students "must submit to testing on a periodic basis," UVI said. Students living on campus must still be vaccinated.

This policy continues even as the Bryan administration [has declared the virus an endemic](#) in the territory.

"I think we are still trying to be cautious about the virus and not assume that it's all behind us," Mr. Hall remarked Tuesday, while stating that the board is going to "monitor this fall semester and if it turns out that that is still a barrier to students coming to the university, then I would certainly ask the board to reexamine it."

Until then, unvaccinated students will be required to take Covid tests at the beginning of the academic year and on a monthly basis thereafter.

And while the UVI president noted that the board intends to re-examine the policy for students, it has not indicated that the same will happen for faculty members. "That was not part of the board's change mainly because, number one, all of our employees are vaccinated now," he told the senators.

He said there was no evidence to suggest that faculty members are quitting because of the policy, noting that only two full-time employees had resigned because of it. "We have hired quite a number of employees throughout the year since the requirement was in place, we have not had

problems hiring individuals who are vaccinated,” he said.

In August 2021, 137 individuals, or 25 percent of UVI's 550 employees had not adhered to the vaccination mandate days ahead of its deadline.

The university's Summer Bridge Program which focuses on student transition from high school to college prior to the opening of the school year, was also being affected as a result of the mandatory vaccination policy.

In response to its declining registration numbers, the university has developed a three-year plan to boost student enrollment back to pre-Covid numbers, as it faces the lowest student participation since the 1980s.

It has so far adopted a number of measures to support student retention including the recruitment of new online students. “This program is only about five years old. We started out with zero students; we are up to 100 students in that program now [and] we are projecting to grow that program each year to at least by 50 students or more each year,” he said.

Mr. Hall also spoke of ongoing initiatives to bolster enrollment at the university which includes a new free tuition first policy which gives eligible students the flexibility to secure necessities like room and board while attending school.

In explaining the revised policy, the president emphasized that, “Free tuition doesn't cover books, and clearly it doesn't cover housing and not just when you live on campus but other housing needs that a student has while they are attending the university.”

He said students whose families fell in the lowest income bracket were benefiting the least from free tuition, particularly because they were receiving financial assistance from the Federal Pell Grants which covered close to 90 percent of their tuition.

Mr. Hall explained that with this change, those students would be able to benefit more from free tuition and use the Pell Grant funds to cover other expense needs to attend the university.

Meanwhile, the university's board is planning to increase tuition in the next academic year and the one subsequently after, to be able to sufficiently service its debts.