

## **How A Run Club Can Shape A Presidency**

It's 7:15 am on a brisk Thursday morning across the street from the University of Virginia's picturesque Rotunda and dozens of students congregate with their running shoes laced up. While many across grounds and the Charlottesville neighborhoods lay tucked in bed until their first classes of the day begin, nearly a hundred students arrive outside President Jim Ryan's office to run a three mile loop with him.

"The only rule is don't get hit by a bus," Ryan jokes to the crowd huddled around him shivering.

Shortly after 7:30 am, the group begins a steady pace down Alderman road, cruising by each library and winding down the hill towards dorms. President Ryan hardly breaks a sweat as he chats with students at the front of the pack, cracking jokes with runners behind him and smiling at those who pass in the opposite direction.

These famous "Run With Jim" mornings occur several Thursdays each month when President Ryan invites students to join him on his near-daily three mile run and talk to him about anything. The runs give Ryan a chance to hear what's on students' minds in an informal setting, and the runs give students the chance to connect with Ryan on a more personal level that isn't through a University sanctioned email or press release.

"Hearing from students is a good way to gauge what's going well and what needs attention," Ryan said. "The runs are a way to make connections and build relationships, something UVA is especially known for."

In the past year, university presidents have grappled with how to establish a working role in relation to their student bodies, alumni, and public media. As debates swirling around political, racial, and economic issues in higher education increase, the spotlight on university presidents continues to grow.

How do university presidents manage the tough job and surmounting pressure of saying and doing the right thing for their universities? Running seems to be part of Ryan's strategy.

In October 2018, shortly after Ryan began his term as the ninth president of UVA, a couple of students posted a tweet asking to run with him. Ryan tweeted back, accepting the offer and extending the invitation to anyone else who wanted to join. Over 100 additional students and members of the Charlottesville community showed up at 6:30 am the next morning to run.

Since that day, the Thursday morning runs have repeated and spiraled into a tradition, often in partnership with a student organization or local non-profit. A welcome "Run With Jim" is hosted for first-years in their first month of school, and a run is hosted for graduating fourth-years in their final weeks as students.

"Talking with and getting to know students is hands-down my favorite part of this job, so the runs are a real highlight," Ryan said.

According to Matthew Webber, Senior Advisor to the President, the runs give students the chance to connect with Ryan through something he loves. Webber helped kickstart the events back in 2018 when he was still an assistant to the President, and watched it grow into a widely attended tradition.

“It became this whole way to engage with students, faculty, staff, and community members and draw attention to some really good causes,” Webber said.

Running has been a long time passion for President Ryan, who raced in his 13th Boston Marathon this month in honor of the patients and health care providers at UVA Children’s Health. Last year, he ran the marathon in honor of the three UVA football players whose lives were lost in the Nov. 13 shooting on Grounds.

A complex task for these leaders has always been finding a balance between focusing on the students and focusing on the external pressures to support the marketing and fundraising for a university. These issues date back to the early 1900's, when UVA's first president Edwin Alderman raised money to expand the university’s social science offerings to include new professional and technical studies like economics, law and engineering.

Gerald Starsia is a professor in leadership and strategy in higher education at UVA’s School of Education and Human Development, and he has served in multiple administrative roles at the Darden School of Business and McIntire School of Commerce. He says university presidents must balance the needs of the different stakeholders in a way where they don’t become too much of a detached politician.

“The trick for Jim and the trick for great leaders in higher ed is the ability to humanize a big bureaucracy,” Starsia said. “I think the ability to humanize these unfeeling cold, large bureaucracies is a real talent and I see it in very few leaders. Jim happens to be one.”

Being a university president has never been an easy job. The stakes raised this past year, when Stanford's president stepped down after an independent review found flaws in studies he oversaw, the presidents of Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania resigned following a firestorm of public criticism for how they handled antisemitism on campus, and Yale's president announced his retirement in the wake of the Supreme Court's ban on race-conscious admissions.

Most of a president’s meetings are behind closed doors away from the public, which can establish an image of being inaccessible to the university community. Starsia said President Ryan is able to bridge the gap between high level political responsibilities and engaging with students on campus.

“The students see him around, interested in what they're doing and celebrating and living life with them as a member of the UVA community,”

When most of a president’s meetings and obligations are behind closed doors, that can establish an image of being inaccessible to the university community. But his runs keep him in a positive light, according to students.

“He has a pretty good reputation amongst the students,” said Sloan Davidson, a second-year student who participated in several runs last spring during her field hockey off-season.

She said though as a president he should be more than just a friendly figure, events like this help keep people’s perception of him and the work he does in a positive light. Something notable he does throughout the runs that she noticed was run with different pace groups and talk to people throughout the pack.

“He really does make an effort in the run to get to know everyone who’s participating,” Davidson said.

The runs are often hosted in partnership with a student organization or cause. One of the first runs Davidson participated in was a run to support “Morgan’s Message”, a non-profit that raises awareness for student-athlete mental health- an important cause to Davis as an athlete.

In the fast-paced world of higher education leadership, finding moments to genuinely connect with students proves to be difficult, but Ryan might have cracked the code in a creative way through exercise.

Working out with students allows him to transcend the traditional boundaries of presidential authority in an informal setting. By engaging in candid conversations about any topic, big or small, he gives students the sense that he is listening to them and establishes trust. In addition, he gains insights into the concerns, feelings, and hopes of the group of people he governs.

“Running isn’t the only way to connect, of course,” Ryan said. “I’ve also done Spin With Jim, Swim With Jim, and Yoga With Jim – I’m still working on my form.”