

Put Students First
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Interest groups play a vital role in the operation of democratic government. They serve as a vehicle through which the desires and needs of a group of people are made known to their elected representatives.

While there is some cynicism about the power and influence of some interest groups, it is the role of the elected official to determine the social good among competing interests. Recently I had the opportunity to meet a representative of a very interesting and exciting interest group – The Students of William and Mary Political Action Committee.

The William and Mary students’ PAC is an incorporated and registered organization that is non-partisan and “founded and administered by students to advance the interests of students of the college of William and Mary and higher education students across the state.” Their prospectus to potential contributors goes on to state that ‘through increasing public awareness and promoting policies that benefit higher education, we hope to improve the academic environment for all students seeking a higher education in the Commonwealth of Virginia.’

The formation of this first student-run political action committee in Virginia could not have been more timely. It came about as students became aware of the low level of funding for higher education in the state. By the General Assembly’s own studies, colleges and universities are under-funded by at least \$200 million per year when compared with peer institutions in other states. And that was before the most recent budget cuts.

A major activity of the student PAC will be passage of the \$900.5 million general obligation bond issue that will be on the ballot on November 5. The monies will go for classrooms and laboratories on college campuses throughout the state as well as for improvements to state museums.

The students at William and Mary are interested in the \$33.3 for renovations to some deplorable buildings at the historic campus. George Mason University is scheduled to receive \$79.6 million for two classrooms, a research building and four renovation projects. The Community College System will receive \$159.4 million including \$3.5 million for a new classroom building and renovations at all campuses at Northern Virginia Community College.

It is really exciting to see the students organizing on behalf of the bond issue and funding for higher education. I hope they are successful in organizing groups at other institutions. If you want to know more about their activities, visit www.PutStudentsFirst.org.

The students’ “special interest” reflects the greater public good. With a projected growth in college enrollment of more than 35,000 in the next decade, we need additional classrooms. We need to be sure to vote on November 5 and to support the general obligation bond issue for educational facilities. Let’s join together to put students first!