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Virginia's Higher-Education Chief Bows Out After 13 Tumultuous Months

A push for change and 'intellectual accountability' ran into politics and, in the end, romance

By SARA HEBEL

Richmond, Va.

William B. Allen has stepped over some fine lines in his career with confidence and flair. But over the last year, as Virginia's chief executive for public higher education, his unconventional nature made for a bumpy, sometimes bizarre tenure, which ended abruptly last month.

A self-described "awkward Yankee," Mr. Allen, the outgoing director of the State Council of

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Higher Education for Virginia, clashed from the start with a very traditional Virginia establishment. His intellectual tenacity and thirst for change were not an easy fit in a state with independent-minded college presidents and lawmakers who kept a firm grip

on higher education.

For Mr. Allen, though, being an outsider with a fresh perspective meant generating debate among Virginia's public colleges. As a veteran academic taking over a state office for the first time, and as a conservative black leader in higher education, Mr. Allen stood out in his 13 months here. He valued a vigorous debate over ideas more than he worried about legislative clashes or the practicalities of advancing his agenda.

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"To be an effective advocate for higher education doesn't mean you become a cheerleader," Mr. Allen said in one of several interviews. "You have got to be willing to look at it with a cold eye because only on the basis of considered judgment, not habit, can one claim excellence."

A government professor, Mr. Allen strove to leave no thought unexplored, no policy unexamined. After all, he was part of the cause championed by Thomas Jefferson, who wrote of the "illimitable freedom of the human mind" when describing his plan for the University of Virginia.

Like Jefferson, whom he admires, Mr. Allen struggled during his year in Virginia with the tug between his head and his heart, between making rational choices and following his emotions. In the end, Mr. Allen's heart won out: A major reason he decided to resign was that had begun a romantic affair with a co-worker, he said.

He said that last month, his thoughts about his relationship dovetailed with those of new career options. Mr. Allen, who is divorced, continues the relationship with the woman, who once reported to him and still works for the higher-education council. She had been reassigned twice to new jobs, outside his direct supervision, but Mr. Allen decided it was in the council's best interest for him to step down.

From his first day in Virginia, in June 1998, right up to his resignation 13 months later, Mr. Allen displayed a flair for drama.

When he arrived in Virginia, he was immediately put on the defensive because of comments he had made questioning state support for historically black colleges here. He quickly qualified his statements, saying he had been misunderstood.

And in the days after he announced his departure, he clouded the reasons for it in mystery and in short, vague statements. When asked to elaborate on his decision to leave, he would say only: "All will become clear."

Mr. Allen faced disadvantages from the start. Many Virginia lawmakers and college officials remained upset about the ouster of Mr. Allen's popular predecessor, Gordon K. Davies, who had been director for 20 years before Republican appointees to the council voted him out, in April 1997.

Mr. Allen's headstrong personality initially turned off many education leaders and lawmakers in this Southern state. College presidents and his own staff members repeatedly told Mr. Allen that in Virginia, history and tradition counted for more than he wanted to believe -- and that to make progress, he needed to adopt a more diplomatic style.

"I don't think he realized his job is a political job and he needed to deal with different entities by dealing with their egos and going to their offices and talking with them in person," said one campus president, who asked not to be named. "He needed to be deferential sometimes when he hasn't been."

Mr. Allen's background as an academic and his bookish intellect did not train him for a position in a highly charged political environment, in which he ran an agency that oversaw about \$1.4-billion a year in state aid for higher education. He had never before developed policy for colleges. What's more, he saw his role in that process as akin to delivering the opening question in a seminar. The state's college leaders and interests, then, would hash out the answers. (Mr. Davies, by contrast, had operated with more informal authority to make decisions throughout the policy process, as state leaders looked to him for his institutional memory and trusted his candor.)

"I wouldn't make the decisions," Mr. Allen said in an June interview. "I wouldn't want to, they wouldn't be good decisions."

"The less responsibility you have to make decisions, the more specific you can be in your criticisms," he added. "Nobody in Virginia takes anything I say as a command. It's great. It's liberating."

But his propensity for questioning long-standing policy and calling for significant change alienated some lawmakers. "He is a bright, capable individual," said Del. Alan A. Diamonstein, a Democrat from Newport News. "But he traveled a different road than legislators wished he would travel."

In many ways, his year in Virginia unfolded much like his five years as dean of James Madison College at Michigan State, his immediate past job. There, Mr. Allen commissioned an outside review and led an internal self-study of the college's administration and fund-raising capabilities.

"He was a stimulus for debate," said Norman A. Graham, the acting dean of James Madison College. "He forced us to re-examine ourselves."

Mr. Allen said that he had come to Virginia to see how far he could push the limits of academic leadership here, through the same kind of self-evaluation.

"I'm not always the easiest person for other people to work with," Mr. Allen said. "People don't find me as pleasant as they would like others to be. I ask questions and insist on a high level of intellectual accountability."

Beyond style, Mr. Allen's political views also were a bit of a novelty for Virginia higher education.

In the late 1980s, Mr. Allen headed the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, where he expressed his adamant opposition to affirmative action. He also came under fire, in 1989, when he delivered a speech titled "Blacks? Animals? Homosexuals? What Is a Minority?"

What's more, he was ideologically to the right of many of his counterparts in other states. The Virginia council's board, meanwhile, had become dominated by Republicans who shared his view that academic standards should be higher. When he was appointed, the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni** -- a tradition-minded group that backs higher standards -- ran a front-page article in its newsletter that read: "We knew it could be done! At last, one of our own has been selected to head a state higher-education system."

"He worked hard, he was a good conservative," said Scott Goodman, a member of the Virginia higher-education council. "A lot of what Mr. Allen worked toward will lead him to be vindicated as a visionary leader."

From the beginning, Mr. Allen began rebuilding the higher-education council's staff, which had been depleted by high-level departures after Mr. Davies left. "He has hired some very good people, and these people have come in and played a role that has been helpful," said Alan G. Merten, president of George Mason University. "They have been able to be critical and provide some sort of advice and consultancy."

The staff produced some major policy documents over the past

year, most notably a comprehensive "Virginia Plan" that lays out broad goals for higher education. It also includes some controversial elements, such as a new way to allocate funds to the state's public colleges. Instead of lobbying the legislature for more money, college officials would receive block grants tied in part to such performance measures as graduation and retention rates.

Developing sweeping proposals and non-traditional policy options led Mr. Allen to consider his first several months here a success. He said he was not seeking to cast his own ideas in stone, but to encourage other leaders to clarify ambiguous goals.

Take, for instance, the issue of universal access. "We have to come to terms with what we mean by that," Mr. Allen said. "That is not open admissions. It is time for policy makers to think about it and talk about it. It is an act of piety to reaffirm a commitment to something without pausing to ask themselves what it means."

Jerry L. Martin, president of the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**, said Mr. Allen had provided momentum in Virginia for making colleges more accountable for the state money they get.

"He's really tackled the big questions and successfully put them to the forefront of discussions," Mr. Martin said.

Despite Mr. Allen's efforts, members of the Virginia higher-education council passed up an opportunity to extend his two-year contract last December, he said. In his contract, he had stipulated that council members discuss an evaluation and contract extension about six months after his arrival.

John D. Padgett, chairman of the council, said members had provided a "fine" evaluation of Mr. Allen at that time and had given him a bonus.

Mr. Allen agreed that the council had offered no criticisms. Nevertheless, "I took note of it," he said, referring to the lack of action on his contract.

As 1999 began, Mr. Allen put the final touches on the Virginia Plan and prepared to hit the road to discuss it at each public university.

By then, many college officials and higher-education observers said, Mr. Allen was slowly acclimating to the ways of Virginia. About one month before his tour began, during an interview, Mr. Allen mulled over a question about what had surprised him the most about the state's politics. G. Paul Nardo, the council's associate director of communications, quickly intervened, telling Mr. Allen to think before speaking. "Remember to say something you wouldn't mind having quoted in the newspapers," Mr. Nardo said.

Mr. Allen paused, then smiled broadly. "Yes," he said, nodding his head. "I see what you mean.

"I expected it to be a difficult job," Mr. Allen continued. People had been more than gracious, he said, but he was worried that Virginia was "losing focus on its assets" and needed to "look at itself with clear eyes again."

How had those views been received by lawmakers and college officials? Said Mr. Allen: "Human nature expects resistance."

When Mr. Allen and his staff members visited the University of Virginia, in June, his learning curve was again apparent. President John T. Casteen III gently warned Mr. Allen of the uphill battles some of his proposals were likely to face.

"Lawmakers are very jealous of their statutory right to control things," the president remarked after Mr. Allen presented his plan. The proposal, Mr. Casteen added, "has the potential to do all sorts of good things, but you're going to have to be careful."

Mr. Allen smiled knowingly. "This is a political environment with a history to which we are becoming greatly sensitized," he replied, as he stood in the Dome Room of the university's Rotunda. "I thought I could get away with being ignorant for a while."

Later, walking the grounds that Jefferson designed, Mr. Allen confessed that he still felt like an outsider, in a state where bold ideas were tempered by a devotion to tradition-bound process.

"There's a lot of tradition here," he said. "I've never seen anything quite like it."

Mr. Allen soon saw what Mr. Casteen meant. Later in June, the

director appeared before the state House Appropriations Committee to discuss the Virginia Plan. Afterwards, lawmakers blasted the plan as one that would lead to micromanagement of the state's colleges. Delegate Diamonstein charged that the plan would "cookie-cut" institutions, and he and others faulted Mr. Allen for not discussing his proposals with them as they were being developed.

"I had an interesting encounter," Mr. Allen said after arriving back at the council office. "They decided to go on the warpath with performance funding."

The encounter with lawmakers, though, also left him encouraged. He said he felt he was being taken seriously because his plans had provoked such intense responses.

"That's what I'm about," he said.

While he was trying to advance his ideas, however, Mr. Allen was also pursuing a personal relationship that would create a different kind of turmoil. He had developed a platonic friendship with a female aide he supervised. The relationship later blossomed into romance, but even then, the feelings were carefully contemplated along the way.

At the end of March, when the two became tight friends, Mr. Allen removed the female aide from his close supervision to another job at the agency. Then, at the end of June, when she became legally separated from her husband and she and Mr. Allen began a romance, she was placed in a position that Mr. Allen did not supervise at all.

At about that time, Mr. Allen sought advise from Mr. Padgett, the council chairman. Mr. Allen said he wanted to continue the relationship -- but wondered if that would require his resignation. They agreed, Mr. Allen said, that it would not.

But over the next month, Mr. Allen continued to mull how his romance could affect the council's working environment, and at the same time he began weighing his career options.

"Between the end of June and the end of July, my thinking about my professional options merged with my thinking about my professional judgment about how you should work and how you should operate," Mr. Allen said. "I decided it was not workable."

His resignation shocked his staff and many Virginia officials. He announced his decision to leave after consulting council members at a closed-door meeting in mid-July, and was packed and out the door by the end of the following week.

Mr. Allen said it was all very logical. He already had decided in March that when his two-year contract ended, in June 2000, he would go back to Michigan State. He said he missed teaching, and also recounted the moment in December when the council had not extended his contract for another year.

In fact, he sounded confident, once more, about his unconventional actions. Looking back on the last year, he said of his decision to leave: "It was a no-brainer." For now, he plans to live in this city, where he has found many valuable resources for his scholarly pursuits. And where, he feels, he has found love.

William Barclay Allen

EARLY YEARS: Born in Fernandina Beach, Fla., in 1944, 1 of 12 children of a Baptist preacher. He describes his mother, whose education ended after high school, as a "genius."

HIGHER EDUCATION: B.A. in political science, Pepperdine College, 1967; M.A., 1968, and Ph.D., 1972, in government, Claremont Graduate School.

ACADEMIC CAREER: Lecturer in humanities as a Fulbright Advanced Teaching Fellow at University of Rouen, in France, 1970-71; assistant professor, School of Government and Public Administration, American University, 1971-72; assistant professor, associate professor, and then full professor of government, Harvey Mudd College, 1972-92; dean, James Madison College, Michigan State University, 1993-98; director, State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 1998-99.

OTHER PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: President, Claremont Unified School District Board, 1982-83, and member, 1981-83; member, National Council on the Humanities, 1984-87; member, Educational Advisory Committee of the California State Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, 1985-

88; chairman, U.S. Civil Rights Commission, 1988-89, and member, 1987-92; member, Board of Visitors and Governors at St. John's College, 1989-present; trustee, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford University, 1995.

PERSONAL: Divorced; two children. He is a dedicated academic who has several books and projects in progress. During his forthcoming one-year sabbatical, he wants to finish translating *The Spirit of the Laws*, a 1748 treatise by the French philosopher Baron de Montesquieu. He also plans to continue working on a book about Harriet Beecher Stowe and her insights on the challenges that face an interracial society. He is fluent in French and reads German, ancient Greek, Italian, Latin, and Spanish. Until he recently stopped playing the recorder, he says he was "tolerably good" on the instrument.

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