



TESTIMONY OF
DR. SAFIYA GEORGE, PRESIDENT
UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN
ISLANDS

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON BUDGET, APPROPRIATIONS AND FINANCE
THIRTY-SIXTH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

EARLE B. OTTLEY LEGISLATIVE HALL
ST. THOMAS
U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Chairman Francis and other members of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, other members of the Thirty-Sixth Legislature present, other testifiers, members of the press, persons in the viewing and listening audiences, ladies, and gentlemen. My name is Dr. Safiya George, and I have the privilege of serving as President of the University of the Virgin Islands. It is an honor to appear before this distinguished body to present the University's Fiscal Year 2025–2026 budget request.

Joining me today are key members of the University's leadership team: Ms. Guadalupe Valencia, Interim Chief Financial Officer and Vice President for Administration and Finance; Dr. Lora Bailey, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs; and Mr. Michael Morsberger, Vice President for Institutional Advancement. Also present are other members of my Cabinet, and Deans of the various Schools and Colleges within the University.

UVI AS AN ENGINE FOR SOCIAL IMPACT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Returning to lead the University of the Virgin Islands as its sixth president has been the most meaningful and humbling achievement of my professional career. As a native Virgin Islander and proud UVI alumna who studied on both campuses, played on the Women's Basketball team and earned my Bachelor's of Science in Nursing here, my inauguration in March symbolized not only a personal homecoming but a renewed commitment to the future of this vital institution. A central priority of my presidency is to usher UVI into a new era of excellence, where the University stands as a steadfast partner to the Territory and a driving transformative force in positively shaping the social, workforce development and economic trajectory of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

One of the most transformative initiatives undertaken during my tenure thus far has been the development of UVI's new five-year strategic plan, *Momentum: Charting a Course to Becoming a GRAND Destination University Grounded in Excellence*. Guided by an external consultant, UVI adopted its first-ever Agile strategic planning process — a bold departure from its traditional top-down models. Unlike typical strategic plans that often fail due to misaligned assumptions, Agile planning is grounded in dynamic, bottom-up engagement. This iterative and inclusive approach generated nearly 5,000 ideas and recommendations — making it the most participatory planning process in UVI's history. It begins with a collective vision of what we aspire to achieve in two decades, translates that vision into measurable goals for the next two years, and defines actionable objectives in the form of two-quarter projects. These projects are refreshed every six months, allowing UVI to remain adaptive, accountable, and purpose-driven.

More than a roadmap, *GRAND Momentum* will also provide the framework necessary to ground us in institutional values focused on courageous caring, efficiency, par-excellence, student centralism, community and collaboration, partnerships and purpose, culture and traditions, first class customer service, data-based decision-making, discovery, and innovation. The institutional values that will be intricately linked to this strategic plan

and integrated in all things UVI will focus on the GRAND Momentum needed to get us to being #1 in the metrics that matter most to our students, employees, partners, and the public. As part of this process, UVI has also partnered with the University Design Institute at Arizona State University (ASU). ASU’s transformation has earned it global recognition, including ten consecutive years as the #1 most innovative university in the U.S. and multiple top-tier rankings in sustainability and impact, among others.

Additionally, UVI has experienced a steady rise in enrollment, increasing from a 15-year low of 1,655 in Fall 2021 to 1,792 in Fall 2024—an 8.3% gain—with expectations of reaching 1,882 students in Fall 2025. This momentum stems from purposeful enhancements to our academic portfolio, dynamic outreach and recruitment strategies, and a deepened commitment to community engagement. To advance our goal of providing a truly transformative and supportive educational experience, we have restructured internally to prioritize student engagement, success, and retention. This effort has led to the formation of a dedicated student services division that brings together Student Affairs, Housing and Residential Life, Student Activities, the Center for Student Success, Athletics, and the 13D Research & Strategy Innovation Center.

To ensure every student is positioned for success, UVI has also launched a suite of targeted initiatives designed to promote academic achievement, financial stability, and career readiness. Among the most impactful is the President’s Emergency Aid Program, which provides timely support for students facing critical challenges such as housing insecurity, food shortages, or financial emergencies. These efforts are complemented by expanded internship opportunities through a strengthened partnership with the Research & Technology Park, the Presidential Scholars Program, enhanced academic support through the Library and Academic Affairs, increased co-curricular engagement through Athletics, and a more integrated service model delivered by the Center for Student Success—together forming a comprehensive ecosystem of student support. Notably, we have also seen a growing number of top-tier students, such as valedictorians and salutatorians, enrolling at UVI—a promising trend that has outpaced the financial support provided to retain and empower these exceptional local scholars while addressing the brain drain crisis facing the Territory.

Moreover, our graduates and alumni continue to serve as vital contributors to the Virgin Islands, holding key roles across both public and private sectors and helping to fill critical workforce gaps—particularly in nursing and education. Through expanding our portfolio of academic, vocational, and credentialing programs, UVI is cultivating a pipeline of skilled professionals uniquely positioned to address local and regional needs. As we continue to grow enrollment and attract high-achieving scholars, the University’s potential to drive workforce development over the next 4 to 7 years and beyond is substantial, offering a robust solution to local talent shortages and a powerful return on investment for the Virgin Islands.

**ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND HIGHLIGHTS
FOR FISCAL YEAR 2024-2025**

I am pleased to share a few of our accomplishments during this fiscal year so that you fully understand our value to our students, employees and the Territory. There are numerous examples of how the University was a good steward of the funds invested by this body during the current fiscal year. The following achievements represent examples of our progress and good stewardship.

1. UVI had the extraordinary privilege of hosting U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson as the keynote speaker for its historic Student Convocation. Justice Jackson, a trailblazer as the first Black woman and a former public defender appointed to the Supreme Court was also recognized with the

University's highest academic distinction—an honorary doctorate degree — marking the second time that UVI has conferred this honor upon a sitting Supreme Court Justice, following Justice Sonia Sotomayor in 2017.

2. The University set a national record with three women scientists honored as National Science Foundation and Every Page Foundation Ocean Decade Champions—more than any other university or institution in the nation. Dr. Marilyn Brandt, Dr. Kristin Grimes, and Allie Durdall were recognized for their transformative research in coral reef and mangrove restoration, youth engagement, and science-driven coastal resilience, underscoring both UVI's leadership in the marine and environmental sciences and inclusive representation in STEM fields.
3. UVI joined with the V.I. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor to launch the Virgin Islands Teacher Apprenticeship Program — a workforce development initiative aimed at mitigating the Territory's teacher shortage and cultivating a sustainable pipeline of qualified local educators through structured apprenticeship opportunities. The program provides a work-based pathway to certification for paraprofessionals, supported by coursework in our School of Education's Elementary and Early Childhood Education program.
4. We reestablished a physical presence on St. John with the opening of the UVI Community Resource and Development Center — marking the University's return to St. John for the first time since Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Led by the Center for Excellence in Leadership and Learning (UVICELL), the Community Resource and Development Center serves as a vital hub for education, workforce development, and community engagement. This milestone was made possible through strategic collaborations with government and nonprofit partners.
5. UVI, through its Caribbean Green Technology Center and in partnership with the Office of the Governor, VITEMA, and the Office of Disaster Recovery, led the development and successful adoption of the USVI Hazard Mitigation and Resilience Plan. Supported by a \$5 million federal grant, the Plan offers a comprehensive framework for disaster risk reduction, resilient infrastructure planning, and long-term recovery. It introduces the Territory's first Social Vulnerability Index, emphasizes the importance of infrastructure systems that can sustain critical services during and after disasters, and includes strategic recommendations for the preservation of archaeological and cultural sites.
6. Through a groundbreaking partnership with Honeywell International Inc., a Fortune 500 global technology leader, UVI's Process Technology Associate of Applied Science program is redefining technical education by becoming the first university to implement Honeywell's advanced standalone Virtual Reality field simulation technology. This advanced 3D simulation platform offers students a fully immersive experience—enabling them to navigate virtual plant environments, operate equipment, and perform realistic tasks—delivering industry-relevant training that elevates technical competency and job readiness.
7. The Medical Simulation Center on our St. Croix campus has achieved official designation as an Emergency Medical Technician training center and now offers nationally certified emergency medical training on site, in accordance with the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians, the nation's leading certifying body for EMS professionals. This achievement marks a significant step forward in building a robust local pipeline of skilled EMT professionals and expands our capacity for offering training and certification to meet the Territory's growing emergency response needs.

8. The University and UVI Research & Technology Park broke ground on the RTPark Solar Farm and Teaching Array in May—a visionary project that advances clean energy resilience while creating real-world learning opportunities for students in UVI’s Renewable Energy Technology program. Supported by FEMA and built in partnership with VOLT Energy and the Caribbean Green Technology Center, the solar farm replaces hurricane-damaged infrastructure and features a 423kW solar farm and a modular teaching array—positioning UVI as a hub for clean energy innovation and experiential learning in the region.
9. Last month, UVI strengthened its agricultural footprint with the acquisition of the Island Fresh Aquaponics facility on St. Croix—one of the region’s largest aquaponics operations—located at the historic Bethlehem Sugar Factory site. This milestone strengthens UVI’s leadership capacity in sustainable agriculture and research, supports hands-on student learning, and reinforces food security efforts across the Territory and region.
10. UVI celebrated its 61st Commencement Ceremonies in May awarding 288 degrees. The events were historic firsts, with the graduation of the inaugural Executive MBA cohort, the first Associate of Science in Horticulture degrees, and a Virgin Islands couple jointly earning doctoral degrees. The ceremonies also honored UVI alumnae Brigadier Generals Deborah Francis Howell and Sally F. Petty with honorary degrees and featured acclaimed actor and social justice advocate Hill Harper as the keynote speaker, who also received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters.
11. UVI has completed construction of its Biomedical Research and Training Facility on the Orville E. Kean Campus on St. Thomas, with a grand opening anticipated this Fall. This marks a major milestone in the University’s mission to address regional health challenges through cutting-edge research, innovation, and strategic partnerships. With dedicated space for wet and dry labs, computational science, and imaging technologies, the 17,000-square-foot facility will support UVI’s ambitious plan across three research pillars: epidemiology and disease surveillance, AI-driven precision health, and community health resilience in the face of climate and socio-environmental stressors.

The facility’s location adjacent to the Medical School Classroom Building is intentional, serving as both a hub for health research and a foundational asset in UVI’s pursuit of an accredited medical school. By linking research excellence with medical instruction and experiential learning, the University is building the infrastructure and academic depth necessary to support a fully accredited, regionally impactful medical education program.

CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Notwithstanding our progress, the University is navigating a highly challenging local fiscal landscape marked by appropriations reductions and delayed allotments that strain our capacity to deliver consistent quality services and timely payments to our vendors. These challenges are unfolding amid a national policy environment where higher education is at a crossroads. The proposed restructuring and deep funding cuts to the U.S. Department of Education, National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health and other federal agencies alongside significant reductions to key federal programs like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), present an alarming trajectory that could undermine the educational and socio-

economic mobility of countless students. These developments place additional burdens on students and their families who rely on such programs and jeopardize the ability of public institutions—particularly those like UVI that serve historically underserved populations—to fulfill their missions of equity and access.

Additionally, recent federal policy shifts have resulted in the scaling back or elimination of funding for programs focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, climate change, and educational access and is having a cascading effect on student outcomes and community well-being. These changes weaken the scaffolding that supports historically underserved students and remove critical opportunities for engagement in pressing global issues where UVI has led such as climate science, environmental justice, and cross-cultural understanding. Thus, institutions like UVI are left to shoulder the burden of maintaining equitable programming with increasingly limited resources, placing our mission—and our students’ futures—at significant risk.

Moreover, UVI has experienced thus far the termination of six federal grants, resulting in a loss of about \$3.5 million. These cancellations—several without options for appeal—impact priority areas including biomedical research, STEM leadership, faculty development, international exchange, and climate resilience. The early termination of these federal grants also pose multi-year recovery challenges that require strategic intervention and strengthened institutional support. Other key impacts include:

- The loss of 10 graduate international research opportunities due to early cancellation of a USAID/US Forest Service exchange program.
- Elimination of a faculty fellowship and associated research support.
- Termination of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) U-RISE award, disrupting undergraduate biomedical research training and removing 36 paid student research positions, including funding for students to participate in key opportunities such as at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), one of the top universities in the nation.
- Layoff of research personnel tied to climate-smart agriculture programs under the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Loss of faculty support and student mentoring in environmental science and coastal resilience areas due to the cancellation of this initiative funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF).
- Loss of the remaining grant amount of \$1.9 million and \$75,000 in student stipends that funded the Center for the Advancement of STEM Leadership, which served as the nation’s premier intellectual and scholarship-generating resource for examining and determining the kind of leadership that broadens the participation of African Americans in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) and contributed to the development of the next generation of leaders in these fields.

In addition to the grants already lost, there are mounting concerns regarding the future of other critical grants. Among them is a \$1 million, three-year NIH-funded initiative to establish the Caribbean Climate Change, Cancer, and Health Disparities Research Center, which is at risk because of its focus on the intersection of climate change and cancer outcomes in the U.S. Caribbean—a region uniquely vulnerable to both and placing four full-time employees at risk. Also at risk is the \$20 million National Science Foundation-funded Ridge to Reef project, led by our VI-EPSCoR. This five-year initiative is dedicated to understanding and mitigating the impacts of environmental change on the Virgin Islands’ fragile socio-ecological systems. In addition to supporting advanced marine research and coral reef restoration, our Ridge to Reef project provides essential funding for local science education, STEM integration, and workforce development—making it one of the most consequential research programs. Furthermore, due to federal reorganizations and budget cuts, UVI now faces the suspension of critical National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) support, risking \$1.2 million per year over the next 10 years in research and environmental funding. This is compounded by the

collapse of the National Science Foundation’s STEM Education Directorate which severely restricts UVI’s future grant competitiveness, with projected losses in the multimillion-dollar range.

The above factors are further heightened by the ongoing national policy shifts related to immigration and student visa requirements. UVI continues to monitor this landscape carefully to safeguard the interests of our international student population. We currently serve approximately 65 international students, with the majority hailing from the Eastern Caribbean. While we have not experienced any disruptions to date, we are committed to remaining vigilant and responsive to ensure uninterrupted educational access and institutional support for these students.

More importantly, the recent passage of the Reconciliation Bill has sparked significant concerns regarding potential long-term impacts on higher education funding and critical social equity programs. Although we are encouraged that proposed cuts to the Pell Grant program, which over 60% of UVI students depend—were not implemented, the broader climate remains uncertain. The Pell program is a cornerstone of college affordability for first-generation and economically disadvantaged students, and its stability is essential to promote educational access.

Now more than ever, your unwavering support is critical to ensuring we can respond effectively to these evolving challenges and advance our mission to serve the people of this Territory.

FISCAL YEAR 2025-2026 BUDGET REQUEST

The University is thankful for the support Governor Albert Bryan Jr. provided in the budget he submitted to this body for the University for FY2025-2026. Yet there are some key oversights and needs of the University that I ask this Committee to address in the final Fiscal Year 2026 budget of the University. Below is the University’s budget request for FY2025-2026. It includes the base budget appropriation for FY2025, and the additional requests mentioned below. We appreciate your support of this request

The breakdown of the request is as follows:

General Operating Requirements	39,000,000
Agricultural Extension & Co-op Extension Local Match Requirement	1,337,858
Debt Service	1,800,000
SBDC Local Match Requirements	300,000
Senior Citizens Tuition Requirements and Increase	300,000
Valedictorian and Salutatorian Scholarships	200,000
Center for Excellence in Leadership & Learning	355,901
Green Technology	200,000
University Bound Program	355,901
Senior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (SROTC)	100,000
VI Academic & Cultural Awards	300,000
John Brewers Beach Security & Maintenance	100,000
Bachelor of Science in Nursing Degree Program - St. Croix Campus	400,000
Virgin Islands Caribbean Cultural Center	150,470
Hospitality and Tourism Program	459,345
Agricultural Science and Aquaculture Program	989,912
Master's Program in Social Work - Albert A. Sheen Campus	615,502
Summer Bridge Program	115,000
UM Labor Force Survey	110,000
Congressional Scholarship Program	150,000
VI - EPSCoR Local Match Requirement	250,000
School of Education Dept. of Education Early Childhood Education Partnership and Professional Development	27,500
Office of Self-Determination and Constitutional Development	75,000
UM Simulation Center Maintenance and Supplies	325,000
UM Cell Surveyor Program	250,000
UM Cell Appraisers Program	100,000
Construction Manager Program	484,146
UM Medical School Reserve Fund	1,000,000
Grand Total: General Operating Requirements, Medical School Debt Service and Miscellaneous Section	49,851,535

The sum of \$39,000,000 is for general operations for FY2025-2026. This includes salaries and benefits for the regular and temporary employees, as well as operating expenditures, in accordance with the provisions of Title 17, Chapters 33 and 35 of the Virgin Islands Code. It also includes the across the board employee increases that were implemented for our hard-working and deserving employees at \$1.2 million that this body provided this fiscal year consistent with the raise pool that central government employees received that was not captured in this year's submission from the Office of the Governor. Additionally, it includes the 3% negotiated increases for faculty members for FY2026 as part of the University's Collective Bargaining Agreement and the Government Employees Retirement System (GERS) mandated employer matching contribution. As central government employees have been afforded the opportunity for salary increases, the University is seeking similar support for its human capital needs. Our employees are highly resolute and are a highly valued asset. It is a fact that pay for similar positions on the mainland is much higher. Equal positions at UVI however pay 25-100% less. Salary adjustments are a must in order to maintain positive morale and promote career advancement. We also know that in order to remain competitive we need to continue to maintain quality faculty and staff as costs continue to rise. The last published higher education price index for example rose over 3% in 2024 clearly pointing to the increasing cost of price levels for services in higher education.

Additionally, [APPENDIX I](#) provides details of the University's Fiscal Year 2024-2025 operating budget inclusive of revenues and expenditures as of July 9, 2025.

The amount of \$1.8 Million for debt service will continue servicing our debt obligations. The \$1 Million for UVI Medical School Reserve Fund will assist with our efforts for an accredited medical school. Additionally, our appropriations request includes approximately \$9 Million in funding for programs and initiatives which continue to be crucial to the institution's mission. Continuing to drive our Territory's transformation requires continued investment and advocacy. Within this request we have included funding for legislatively mandated programs and services such as Agricultural Experimental Station & Cooperative Extension Service Local Match, Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Local Match, VI-EPSCoR Local Match, University Bound Program, John Brewers Beach Maintenance & Security, VI Academic & Cultural Awards, UVI CELL Appraisers Program, Congressional Scholarship Program, UVI Labor Force Survey and the Virgin Islands Caribbean Cultural Center. All of these initiatives are fundamental resources that help us continue to meet the demands of our community.

We are grateful for the Governor's unwavering support of the UVICELL funding of \$286,103 that is critical to continue training instructors in the Emergency Medical Services Education Program and for UVI Medical School Simulation Center. However, continuing to make strides will also involve the reinstatement of resources that have played a fundamental role in our evolution and progress. Restoration of funding for critical initiatives which were excluded from the Governor's proposed budget is also being requested. Your continued support is needed for the following programs: Caribbean Green Technology Center, Senior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (SROTC), Hospitality and Tourism Program, Agriculture Science and Aquaculture Program, Master's Program in Social Work (AAS Campus), Summer Bridge Program, UVI CELL Surveyor Program, and the Construction Manager Program.

We have also seen a marked increase in demand for tuition assistance from senior citizens seeking to pursue lifelong learning, made possible through the support of this legislative body. However, current appropriations have not kept pace with this rising need. Similarly, we have experienced significant growth in the

support required for valedictorian and salutatorian students choosing to enroll at UVI. In FY2021, the University disbursed \$270,504 in aid for these high-achieving students, a figure that has increased to \$324,828 for 27 students in the current academic year—despite a fixed appropriation of only \$100,000. To address these widening gaps, we respectfully request an increase of \$100,000 to support Valedictorian & Salutatorian Scholarships and an increase of \$200,000 for the Senior Citizens Tuition Assistance program.

Moreover, local participation in the Free Tuition program has grown dramatically—a promising shift from the program’s historically low utilization. Since its launch, enrollment rose from just 184 students to 548 this academic year, marking a 198% increase in participation since inception. This growth underscores the transformative power of the initiative in expanding access and opportunity for Virgin Islanders seeking higher education. While this growth signals strong demand and greater access, it has also significantly outpaced available funding. The University has not received annually the \$3 million appropriation needed to sustain the program, resulting in a critical depletion of reserves. Of the seven years the program has been in existence, the University received funding only three times and currently has available only \$1.9 Million. Without supplemental support, the Free Tuition program will likely be unable to continue at current levels after FY2026.

CONCLUSION

We know that UVI is a beacon of pride in our community and access to quality education requires consistent investment and support. Realizing the full impact of UVI’s role as a hub for academic excellence, workforce readiness, and innovation however is only possible with ongoing legislative support that matches the scale of our ambition and the urgency of our mission. UVI stands ready to continue serving as a beacon of educational excellence, intellectual capital and innovation for the Virgin Islands, but our ability to fully realize our mission—particularly in these challenging times—relies on your continued partnership and support.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and to share both the challenges and successes of the University. Your continued investment in UVI is an investment in the future stability, resilience, and prosperity of the Virgin Islands. I welcome your questions and look forward to our continued dialogue.

Thank You.

APPENDIX I

FISCAL YEAR 2025 OPERATING BUDGET

REVENUES	FY2025 Approved Operating Budget	Actuals of July 9, 2025	Variance
Tuition & Fees	\$8,844,640	\$7,905,036	(\$939,604)
Appropriations	\$29,100,958	\$17,378,659	(\$11,722,299)
Government Grants & Contracts	\$2,759,483	\$1,690,402	(\$1,069,081)
Private Grants & Contracts	\$1,672,223	\$302,338	(\$1,369,885)
Sales & Services Auxiliary	\$3,567,098	\$2,433,726	(\$1,133,372)
Other Revenues	\$0	\$156,158	\$156,158
Total Revenues	\$45,944,402	\$29,866,319	(\$16,078,083)
EXPENDITURES	FY2025 Approved Operating Budget	Actuals of July 9, 2025	Variance
Instruction	\$11,804,774	\$8,923,554	\$2,881,220
Research	\$967,330	\$512,084	\$455,246
Public Service	\$1,001,797	\$541,807	\$459,990
Academic Support	\$3,458,960	\$2,683,467	\$775,493
Student Services	\$4,445,345	\$3,435,264	\$1,010,081
Institutional Support	\$10,859,363	\$12,956,124	(\$2,096,761)
Operations/Maintenance of Plant	\$8,402,661	\$6,249,650	\$2,153,011
Auxiliary Enterprises	\$4,788,368	\$3,200,208	\$1,588,160
Transfers Match (AES & CES)	\$1,415,804	\$3,886	\$1,411,918
Total Expenditures & Transfers	\$47,144,402	\$38,506,044	\$8,638,358
Net Operating Position	(\$1,200,000)	(\$8,639,725)	(\$7,439,725)