



TESTIMONY OF DR. SAFIYA GEORGE

President, University of the Virgin Islands
Before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development
36th Legislature of the U.S. Virgin Islands
Senator Kurt Vialet, Chair
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Good day, Senator Vialet, Honorable Members of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, members of the Legislature, and members of the public. My name is Dr. Safiya George, President of the University of the Virgin Islands.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the status of the University of the Virgin Islands. I appreciate the Committee's continued partnership and its commitment to strengthening education and workforce development across our Territory.

Overall Status of the University

The University of the Virgin Islands stands at a critical moment, one defined by both forward momentum and real operational constraints. As the Territory's only public university, our responsibility is not only to educate, but to serve as a driver of workforce readiness, economic mobility, and long-term sustainability for the Virgin Islands.

At the center of this work is our **Grand Momentum Strategic Plan (2025–2030)**, a five-year, metrics-driven roadmap designed to position UVI as a leading, student-centered, and financially sustainable institution. The plan is anchored in five core priorities: **G**iving, **G**rowth & Financial Transformation, **R**esource Management Recruitment & Retention, **A**cademic Achievement & Excellence, **N**imbleness through Operational Excellence, and **D**ata Science Distinction & Destination University, each supported by defined initiatives, measurable outcomes, and clear performance indicators. Through this framework, we are aligning enrollment growth, student retention, operational efficiency, and revenue diversification efforts to ensure that progress is not only strategic, but measurable and accountable.

Guided by our Grand Momentum Strategic Plan (2025–2030), we are advancing a focused transformation of the institution, strengthening academic delivery, improving operational efficiency, and expanding access. At the same time, our ability to sustain and scale this progress is increasingly tied to the reliability and timing of our funding. This work is especially important as we respond to current enrollment pressures and position the University for sustainable growth.

Overall, the status of the University remains committed, focused, and actively driving key institutional priorities. We are strengthening alignment across campuses and entities under a

One UVI approach, improving student experience, and building systems that support long-term success.

However, like many institutions, we are navigating challenges related to resource constraints, infrastructure needs, and enrollment pressures. What is distinct for UVI is the degree to which funding variability directly impacts our ability to maintain access, sustain programs, and plan effectively.

Current UVI Enrollment Levels

Over the past 64 years UVI's enrollment and retention strategies have resulted in over 11,000 graduates from the "College" of the Virgin Islands and the "University" of the Virgin Islands. Today, we have 84% of our graduates residing within the territory. Many of our graduates are actively still engaged in the workforce, and an impressive number of our UVI alumni are "leading" within our local government and agencies, and making significant impact to improve the economy of the Virgin Islands

Currently, UVI's Fall enrollment continues to trend upward, increasing from 1,792 students in Fall 2024 to 1,863 students in Fall 2025, a 4% increase. This builds on steady year-over-year growth since Fall 2021, when enrollment reached a low of 1,655 students, with increases of 1%, 4%, 3%, and 4% respectively, reflecting deliberate strategies to stabilize and rebuild enrollment.

The University made targeted investments to support student persistence, including institutional scholarships and emergency financial assistance, ensuring that Virgin Islands students were able to remain enrolled and continue their academic progress.

At the same time, UVI has successfully returned to pre-pandemic enrollment levels, although enrollment has not yet fully recovered to pre-hurricane benchmarks, underscoring the long-term impact of external disruptions on the institution and the Territory.

These gains have been achieved through a combination of targeted recruitment, expanded access, and strengthened retention strategies. They also reflect the University's continued commitment to educating Virgin Islands students and addressing the Territory's workforce needs, particularly in the context of ongoing population shifts and brain drain.

Current Strategies to Increase Enrollment

While these trends are encouraging, they also reinforce the importance of sustaining enrollment growth through strategic, data-informed initiatives. The University continues to implement focused strategies to stabilize and grow enrollment, including:

1. Expansion of UVI Online, increasing access for working adults and non-traditional students. UVI Online enrollment, for example, increased from 169 students in Spring 2025 to 181 students in Spring 2026, an increase of approximately 7.1%, demonstrating growing demand for flexible and accessible learning options.
2. Strengthening local and regional recruitment pipelines across the Territory and Caribbean

3. Improving student retention and progression through proactive advising, early alert interventions, and targeted financial support. This effort has enabled more than 50 students to remain enrolled and on track for graduation. Retention has increased from 68% to 70%.
4. Aligning academic programs with workforce demand in critical sectors
5. Building structured workforce pathways, including internships, certifications, and employer partnerships

Our focus is not only on enrollment growth, but on ensuring that students who enter UVI are supported to completion and positioned for success in the workforce. Additional student success initiatives, including expanded advisement support, experiential learning opportunities, and workforce-aligned academic programs, continue to strengthen student persistence, academic achievement, and workforce readiness.

These efforts are translating into tangible student success outcomes. For the upcoming commencement cycle, the University anticipates graduating approximately 269 students across its campuses, including 60 students from Fall 2025 in St. Thomas, 147 students from Spring 2026 in St. Thomas, and 62 students from Spring 2026 in St. Croix. These figures include graduates from online programs and reflect the continued progress of students toward degree completion and entry into the workforce.

The University of the Virgin Islands is also strengthening workforce readiness through targeted, high-impact partnerships. In collaboration with The Pierce & Hill Harper Foundation, UVI launched *The Active Architect Master Class Series*, engaging a competitive cohort of 20 to 25 upper-level students from November 2025 through April 2026. Led by Dr. Hill Harper, the program delivers hands-on workshops, one-on-one mentoring, and team-based innovation projects that build leadership, critical thinking, and real-world problem-solving skills aligned with today's workforce demands.

Status of the Virgin Islands Higher Education Scholarship Program (VIHESP)/ Free Tuition Fund

The Free Tuition Fund has been a critical access point for Virgin Islands students, significantly reducing financial barriers to higher education. In 2019, the Government of the Virgin Islands enacted the USVI Free Tuition Scholarship/Subsidy Program to make attendance at the University of the Virgin Islands more affordable for residents. The program covers tuition costs for eligible students pursuing their first undergraduate degree and has served as a meaningful driver of social mobility across the Territory.

Originally designed for full-time, on-campus students, the program was expanded in 2024 to include part-time and online students. This expansion significantly increased access to higher education, particularly for working adults and non-traditional students, and allowed students to benefit from the program without requiring federal financial aid participation.

Since its inception, the Free Tuition Program has expanded significantly in both reach and impact, serving a growing number of Virgin Islands students each year.

The number of students receiving Free Tuition support has increased steadily over time:

- **Academic Year (AY) 2019–2020:** 184 students
- **AY 2020–2021:** 170 students
- **AY 2021–2022:** 153 students
- **AY 2022–2023:** 291 students
- **AY 2023–2024:** 401 students
- **AY 2024–2025:** 548 students
- **AY 2025–2026:** 445 students (*Fall 2025 only*)

This growth reflects the program’s expanding role as a primary access point to higher education in the Territory.

Correspondingly, the total financial investment in the program has increased substantially:

- **Academic Year (AY) 2019–2020:** \$636,739
- **AY 2020–2021:** \$573,719
- **AY 2021–2022:** \$483,700
- **AY 2022–2023:** \$1.23 million
- **AY 2023–2024:** \$1.76 million
- **AY 2024–2025:** \$2.39 million
- **AY 2025–2026:** \$1.16 million (*Fall 2025 only*)

These trends demonstrate both the growing demand for the program and its critical importance in supporting student access, persistence, and degree completion across the Virgin Islands. They also underscore the urgent need to align funding with demand.

As a result of expanded eligibility and increased participation, the University has experienced significant growth in program utilization. While the Government of the Virgin Islands has historically been a strong supporter of this initiative, additional funding requested for fiscal year 2026 was not approved. Without additional funding, the University will be unable to guarantee tuition coverage for eligible students, placing both the program and students’ educational trajectories at substantial risk.

The University is now experiencing a deficit of approximately \$400,000 as of mid-Spring, driven in part by increased participation following the program’s expansion. At this time, the Free Tuition Fund program is in **jeopardy status**, with a negative balance and no remaining funds available.

To sustain the Free Tuition Program and ensure continuity for students, the University requires approximately \$2.6 million to support Spring 2026, Summer 2026, and Fall 2026 student awards.

Due to the absence of appropriated funding for the VIHESP since 2022 and outstanding appropriations owed to the University since the fall, UVI is operating under increasing financial strain and is closely evaluating the sustainability of the program in its current form. While we remain deeply committed to preserving access, there is a strong possibility that new awards may need to be temporarily suspended if funding is not received in a timely manner.

This is not a step we take lightly. The Free Tuition Fund represents an investment in the Territory's future workforce. However, without consistent and reliable funding, the University cannot responsibly extend new financial commitments under the program.

The University has met with Senator Novelle Francis, Jr. and the Post Audit team regarding the Free Tuition deficit and has provided detailed information as requested. We are grateful for their engagement and support, and we remain hopeful that the Virgin Islands Higher Education Scholarship Program will be funded to avoid interruption in students' current and future studies as they prepare to enter the Virgin Islands workforce.

We respectfully seek continued partnership with the Legislature to identify a path forward that sustains this critical program while ensuring the University's financial stability. Stabilizing enrollment and expanding access, particularly for Virgin Islands residents, will require continued alignment between institutional strategy and sustained financial support.

Status of GVI Allotments to UVI and Impacts

The University is grateful for the Government's ongoing support and recognizes the importance of these appropriations in sustaining operations. However, the timing, consistency, and fulfillment of these allotments remain a significant concern.

At present, UVI *has not* received the following appropriated funds:

- **Fiscal Year 2025:**
 - September 2025 allotment (outstanding)
- **Fiscal Year 2026:**
 - Remaining balance for January 2026
 - Full allotments for February, March, and April 2026

These outstanding allotments currently total approximately \$11.4 million, including \$2.9 million from September 2025, and \$2.9 million each for February, March, and April 2026.

These delays are creating immediate and material operational challenges. The University continues to incur expenses related to payroll, academic operations, and student services in advance of receiving these funds, placing significant strain on institutional liquidity.

As a result of these funding gaps, the University is facing increasing difficulty in meeting payroll obligations, sustaining academic operations, and providing essential student services.

Looking ahead, the University will require approximately \$3 million annually to sustainably support operations and maintain access for students.

These funding needs are not projections in isolation; they reflect current operational realities, including increased institutional costs such as:

- Rising employee health insurance expenses
- More than \$3 million in utility (WAPA) costs
- Infrastructure-related expenses, including equipment failures and repairs linked to power instability

Without the timely release of appropriated funds and a more predictable funding structure, the University will be forced to make difficult decisions that directly impact student access, workforce development, and the Territory's broader economic stability.

For the Committee's convenience, we have provided a one-page **Legislative Briefing Snapshot** *at the end of this testimony outlining key data points related to the Free Tuition Program, appropriations, and current financial considerations.

Status of the Agricultural Program including Livestock Farming Initiatives

UVI continues to play a central role in advancing agriculture, food security, and workforce development across the Territory through the School of Agriculture, which was established in 2022 by integrating the Agricultural Experiment Station, the Cooperative Extension Service, and a newly developed academic program.

This integrated model strengthens the University's land-grant mission by aligning research, extension, and teaching to directly support agricultural production, including livestock farming in the Virgin Islands.

Livestock development remains a key focus area. Current research efforts at the Agricultural Experiment Station are addressing critical issues such as heat stress, fetal programming, parasite management, and pasture rotation, with a focus on St. Croix White sheep and Dorper crossbreeds, both of which are well-suited to the Territory's climate.

In addition to research, UVI is actively expanding workforce capacity in agriculture. The Cooperative Extension Service continues to deliver research-based training and workshops for farmers, including a recent poultry production workshop that engaged more than 20 participants, as well as broader livestock production and sustainable agriculture training programs.

UVI is also strengthening industry pathways through regional collaboration. In partnership with the University of Puerto Rico--Mayagüez, UVI has implemented a workforce development initiative in meat and poultry processing, including the development of a potential certification pathway to support industry needs.

Student interest in agriculture, particularly in livestock, is growing. Of the approximately 40 students enrolled in the School of Agriculture, 17 are majoring in Animal Science, reflecting increasing demand for training in this critical sector.

Together, these efforts position UVI as a key driver of agricultural innovation, workforce development, and food system resilience in the Virgin Islands. These efforts are particularly important as the Territory continues to prioritize food security and local production capacity.

Impact of Anticipated Loss of Federal Funding

Federal funding remains a critical component of the University of the Virgin Islands' research, student support, and institutional development efforts. We are actively monitoring potential changes, including expirations and reductions, and assessing their impact across the University and the broader Territory.

Virgin Islands Small Business Development Center (SBDC)

One clear example is the Virgin Islands Small Business Development Center (VI SBDC), which is supported through federal funding and serves as a vital resource for small business development across the Territory. Over the past three years, the VI SBDC has demonstrated measurable impact, supporting 17 to 26 new business starts annually, providing advising to nearly 500 to over 600 clients each year, and facilitating more than \$3 million in capital infusion in 2025 alone. The program also delivers dozens of training workshops annually, equipping entrepreneurs with the tools needed to start, grow, and sustain their businesses. These services directly contribute to job creation, business resilience, and overall economic growth in the Virgin Islands.

If federal funding for the VI SBDC is not continued for fiscal year 2026, the Territory could experience a significant gap in support services for small businesses. Entrepreneurs would lose access to critical guidance, training, and capital support, potentially resulting in fewer new businesses, reduced job opportunities, and slower economic growth.

Virgin Islands-Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (VI-EPSCoR)

Another important example is the Virgin Islands Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (VI-EPSCoR), funded primarily through the National Science Foundation to strengthen research capacity, STEM education, and workforce development across the Territory. UVI recently submitted a proposal under the NSF EPSCoR Research Infrastructure Improvement Program requesting \$10 million over four years to expand STEM teacher preparation, strengthen K-16 alignment with the Virgin Islands Department of Education, support educator professional development, enhance workforce pipelines, and improve research administration infrastructure.

While the proposal was not selected for funding, the anticipated resources were intended to sustain and expand critical components of the Territory's STEM ecosystem. As a result, the funding and approximately six (6) VI-EPSCoR staff positions, which are solely supported by this federal funding, are now at risk of ending on June 30, 2026. This will create both personnel and operational challenges for STEM education and research support efforts unless alternative funding is identified. These impacts extend beyond the University and directly affect the Territory's ability to build and sustain a competitive STEM workforce.

More broadly, reductions in federal funding across programs would have implications for research initiatives, student support services, and institutional capacity. In response, UVI is actively pursuing diversified funding strategies and strengthening partnerships to mitigate potential risks.

Status of Middle States Accreditation

The University of the Virgin Islands has recently completed its two-year Self-Study as part of its accreditation process with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). Accreditation is essential to the University's operations—it ensures that our students remain eligible for federal financial aid, that UVI degrees are recognized and transferable, and that the institution remains eligible for federal research funding.

We recently hosted a site visit from the Middle States review team, which affirmed our continued progress in strengthening governance, assessment, and institutional effectiveness. The University is actively addressing a financial sustainability observation identified under MSCHE standards and is working within a defined timeline to demonstrate continued financial stability. As we await the Commission's decision this June, the University remains in good standing and fully committed to maintaining accreditation standards while using this process to drive continuous improvement.

Additional Information About Current Operations, Future Plans & Challenges

As we move forward, UVI's approach is focused on:

- Financial transformation and sustainability
- Operational excellence and process improvement
- Digital modernization to enhance student and employee experience
- Workforce alignment with territorial needs
- Student-centered success and outcomes

Recent examples of this approach include targeted academic scheduling adjustments to support student progression, such as the addition of high-demand courses to ensure students remain on track for timely graduation.

With focused execution and sustained governing support, UVI's future plans are to position itself to reinforce its foundation, enhance student experience, and maintain its trajectory toward becoming a destination university for the region and beyond. The University will remain laser focused on strategic priorities aligned with the G.R.A.N.D. Momentum Strategic Plan.

Key priorities for the upcoming reporting period include:

- Strategic plan refinement & re-fresh with component specific plans
- Expanding student workforce-aligned academic programs & initiatives
- Increasing efficiency, nimbleness across units
- Strengthening student retention, graduation & persistence rates

- Expanding research capacity and competitiveness; biomedical research and post award support
- Finalization & refinement of detailed fundraising strategy
- Fiscal management optimization & sustainability (*Includes finding & fixing missed revenue opportunities*)
- Increasing accountability across the institution
- Talent identification, development & optimization
- Strategic partnerships; positioning UVI as a convener, advisor & think tank
- Enhancing digital infrastructure and institutional effectiveness

The University is also advancing strategic fundraising efforts to strengthen its long-term sustainability. A comprehensive case for support has been developed to attract philanthropic investment in key priority areas, including distinguished professorships to recruit and retain expert faculty and researchers, paid student internships, workforce development initiatives, professional and leadership development for employees, campus modernization, student centers, residential housing on both campuses, and the reduction of deferred maintenance.

At the same time, we continue to navigate challenges related to infrastructure, housing capacity, talent recruitment, and resource limitations, many of which are intensified by funding uncertainty.

The University respectfully seeks the Committee's support in ensuring the immediate and timely release of outstanding appropriated funds, as well as collaboration to establish a more predictable and sustainable funding structure that aligns with the University's operational needs and its role in supporting the Territory's workforce and economic development.

Addressing these challenges is critical not only for the University, but for the Territory's broader goals of workforce development, economic growth, and educational attainment.

In closing, the University of the Virgin Islands is moving forward with purpose and discipline. We are building a stronger, more responsive institution; one that reflects both the aspirations of our students and the needs of our Territory.

Sustaining this progress requires continued alignment between strategy and support.

We value the Committee's engagement and look forward to continued collaboration as we advance this work together. We are truly thankful to the Legislature for your previous and continued support of the University of the Virgin Islands, our students and our employees for general operations and for legislatively sponsored programs.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.

UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
*** Legislative Briefing Snapshot**
Committee on Education and Workforce Development

FY2023 – FY2026 Government of the Virgin Islands appropriation schedule:

Fiscal Year	GVI Appropriation	Per Month	OMB Release	Received	If releases were on schedule	CHALLENGE
2026	\$ 34,977,962.00	\$ 2,914,830.17	\$ 11,658,854.28	\$ 10,244,140.71	\$ 17,488,981.00	\$ 7,244,840.29
2025	\$ 36,019,329.00	\$ 3,001,610.75	\$ 33,101,810.10	\$ 33,101,810.10	\$ 36,019,329.00	\$ 2,917,518.90
2024	\$ 39,351,293.00	\$ 3,279,274.42	\$ 38,569,343.40	\$ 38,869,343.40		
2023	\$ 43,299,264.49	\$ 3,608,272.04	\$ 39,929,084.49	\$ 39,929,084.49		
					Pending Receivables	\$ 10,162,359.19
					Pending Payables	12,457,966.71
Current Allotment Process Steps:						
	1 UVI appropriation approved by Legislature/Governor for the fiscal year					
	2 OMB sends UVI letter with monthly allotment for fiscal year					
	3 UVI requests from OMB the release of the monthly allotment					
	4 OMB sends release letter to UVI					
	5 UVI sends memo to DOF to request monthly allotment payment with OMB release letter					
	6 UVI waits for allotment to be received from DOF via ACH					

As a public institution of higher education, the University of the Virgin Islands relies on legislatively approved appropriations that are annually authorized and have historically been reliable. While these appropriations are typically received annually, expenditures related to academic operations, payroll, and student support must often be incurred in advance of cash receipt. The timing differences in receiving allotments have created inefficiencies and interrupted operations. Liquidity ratios also impacted on accreditation reviewer perceptions of our university's financial strength although this could not be fully verified due to the lack of audited financial statements for our most recent years.

1. Free Tuition Fund

- Established: **2019 (GVI legislation)**
- Purpose: Covers tuition for eligible VI residents pursuing their first undergraduate degree
- 2024 Expansion:
 - Extended to part-time and online students
 - Increased accessibility for working adults and non-traditional students
- Current Status: **JEOPARDY**
- **FY2026 Funding Request:** Not funded
- **Current Deficit: ~\$400,000 (mid-Spring 2026)**
- Risk:
 - Potential temporary suspension of new awards
 - Direct impact on student access and enrollment pipeline

2. Government of the Virgin Islands Appropriations

- UVI relies on annual legislative appropriations
- Current Issue:
 - Outstanding appropriations owed since Fall 2025

- Operational Impact:
 - Cash flow strain due to timing gaps between expenses and receipts
 - Affects:
 - Payroll timing and planning
 - Academic operations
 - Student support programs (including Free Tuition Program)
- Strategic Risk:
 - Reduced ability to plan, commit, and sustain programs

3. Enrollment Snapshot & Strategy

- Fall Trend (Year-over-Year Growth):
 - Fall 2024: 1,792 students
 - Fall 2025: 1,863 students (4% increase)

Key Growth Strategies:

- Expansion of UVI Online (growing access channel)
- Regional recruitment across the Caribbean
- Retention & completion focus
- Alignment of programs to workforce demand
- Development of student workforce pathways

4. Federal Funding Exposure

Key Programs at Risk:

VI Small Business Development Center (SBDC)

- New Business Starts: 17–26 annually
- Clients Advised: 481–628 annually
- Capital Infusion: \$3.0M (2025)
- Impact: Job creation, small business growth, economic development
- Risk: Loss of funding would reduce business support services and slow economic activity

VI Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (VI-EPSCoR)

- Federal Source: National Science Foundation (NSF EPSCoR)
- Recent Proposal: \$10M over 4 years (not funded)
- Focus Areas:
 - STEM teacher preparation
 - K–16 education alignment (VIDE partnership)
 - Workforce pipeline development
 - Research infrastructure enhancement
- Immediate Risk:
 - Approximately 6 staff positions at risk by June 30, 2026
- Impact:
 - Reduced STEM workforce pipeline development
 - Disruption to research and education support infrastructure
- Broader Risk:
 - Reduced capacity in:
 - Research programs
 - Student support services
 - Workforce development initiatives
- Mitigation Strategy:
 - Diversification of funding sources
 - Strategic partnerships

- Pursuit of alternative grant opportunities

5. Accreditation Status

- Accreditor: Middle States Commission on Higher Education
- Status: **Good Standing**
- Recent Activity:
 - Preliminary visit by MSCHE Accreditation Team completed
- Focus Areas:
 - Institutional effectiveness
 - Governance
 - Financial sustainability

6. Key Institutional Priorities

- Financial sustainability and transformation
- Operational efficiency and process improvement
- Digital modernization
- Workforce alignment with territorial needs
- Student success and completion outcomes

7. Requested Legislative Action & Alignment:

Immediate Funding Needs:

- \$2.6 million to sustain the VI Higher Education Scholarship Program (Free Tuition) through Spring, Summer, and Fall 2026
- \$3 million annually thereafter to maintain sustainable program funding aligned with demand

Outstanding Government Allotments:

- \$11.4 million in past-due appropriations, including:
 - \$2.9M (Sept FY2025 -pending re-appropriation)
 - \$2.9M (Feb 2026)
 - \$2.9M (Mar 2026)
 - \$2.9M (Apr 2026)

Legislative Action Requested:

- Re-appropriation and release of the September FY2025 allotment not provided during FY25
- Timely release of all outstanding FY2026 allotments
- Stabilization of funding for the Free Tuition Program

Current Alignment:

- Both Governor Albert Bryan and Director Julio Rhymer of the Office of Management and Budget have indicated support for addressing these funding needs.
- Ongoing collaboration is anticipated between the Executive Branch and the Legislature to resolve outstanding appropriations and funding gaps.