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September 7, 2018

Mr. Richard Kemper, Executive Director  
& Executive Committee Membership  
VISAA  
PO Box 324  
Midlothian, VA 23114

Mr. Kemper and Committee Members,

I am writing this letter on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Swimming & Diving Committee to request that the Executive Committee of the VISAA revisit the issue prohibiting our committee from considering the new aquatic facility at Liberty University as a potential venue for the VISAA State Championship. The request to revisit the issue comes after the most recent delivery of the Executive Committee's reasoning behind the original decision to exclude Liberty University as a potential venue, which, as per Dick Kemper, is understood by our committee as follows:

“When this issue came up several years ago, several members of the Executive Committee expressed deep concern about the prospect of selecting Liberty University as the host site for any VISAA tournament or championship events as a result of Liberty's policy with respect to homosexuals. After extensive discussion, the Executive Committee took the position that any arrangement between the VISAA and Liberty would most likely be divisive and exclusionary. As a result, the Executive Committee decided not to select Liberty as the host site for any VISAA tournament or championship events.

Because the Executive Committee believes that nothing has changed with respect to Liberty's policies regarding homosexuals, the Executive Committee determined that there was no reason to change its prior decision.”

In order to provide some context of the predicament the swimming & diving committee faces, I am going to provide a brief history of our process in selecting championship venues:

As the VHSL has grown in membership, sport offerings, and divisions, they have increased their demand for natatoriums at an alarming rate, often locking in 5-year contracts. This has left our committee in somewhat of a scramble to secure venues for the premier VISAA swimming & diving event, the state championship. We have been working diligently to address this issue, working far in advance to have the best possible outcomes at market prices over multiple years.

Prior to the construction of the Liberty University natatorium, there are only a small number of venues across the state that can support the size of our meet, many of which have grave shortcomings anyway:

1. George Mason University, Fairfax – too expensive and priority given to VHSL
2. Freedom Center, George Mason, Manassas – too small (deck space and spectator seating)
3. Aquatic and Fitness Center, UVA – cannot accommodate our schedule needs
4. Mid-Town Aquatic Center, Newport News – no spectator seating at all
5. Hargrave Military Academy, Chatham – too small and remote (deck space, spectator seating, and lodging/banquet needs)
6. Collegiate School Aquatic Center, Richmond – expensive and in a long-term VHSL contract
7. Jeff Rouse Swim and Sport Center, Stafford – limited spectator seating and visibility
8. Christiansburg Aquatic Center, Christiansburg – great facility but remote

Given the list above, it is the committee's belief that the venue that provides the best meet experience for our student-athletes on the list above is the Christiansburg Aquatic Center and, in fact, our meet will be returning there in 2020 and potentially 2021. The design of the facility for the competitors, coaches, and spectators is remarkable and creates the exact experience we hope to create within the VISAA – "unparalleled competitive opportunities for participation and development of character." If there is a shortcoming with Christiansburg, it is the location, the facility being as remote as it is. As such, traveling to Christiansburg every year may become quite a burden on several VISAA member schools, particularly those from the Eastern region.

Liberty University has built an aquatic facility that rivals the facility in Christiansburg and addresses the proximity issue noted above. Indeed, preliminary evaluation of the facility by several member coaches, all of whom have travelled to the facility as members of USA Swimming, have noted the incredible meet experience that the venue can create – the exact type of experience we aim to provide. The location is more suitable for most, if not all VISAA members, and the surrounding area provides teams and their fans with more than suitable accommodations and banquet facilities.

As demonstrated by USA Swimming, VHSL athletic programs, and now several collegiate athletic conferences (including the Big South, Big East, ASUN, and CCSA), the use of a Liberty University facility does not include any regulations regarding who may or may not arrive to their campus and participate in an event there. As such, an organization renting a facility at Liberty University is not required or expected to adopt or condone any ideological philosophy that Liberty may have.

The sole driving force behind our committee's consideration of renting the Liberty University natatorium is, assuming the economics of doing so are competitive with other natatoriums listed above, to provide the absolute best experience to our member student-athletes, their

coaches, and their families. However, the reason we have been given prohibiting us from this consideration is political in nature. It is difficult to be delivered a divisive and political but privately-made decision like this from a group of individuals our committee has never met, which will inhibit us from providing what we believe might be the best and most mission-appropriate experience for the student-athletes under our care.

The VISAA includes an extraordinarily diverse group of schools whose mission statements and values are equally diverse. The decision in this case, prohibiting consideration of Liberty University, seems to exclude a portion of those schools and, therefore, those athletes and their families. Following the logic provided initially, is the VISAA Executive Committee, by way of this decision, suggesting that our student-athletes should not include Liberty University in a potential list of colleges as he or she seeks out college acceptance? Member schools may very well decide which values are most dear to their respective missions, just as individual families may. The VISAA, however, cannot possibly espouse the values of every member school and should, therefore, limit its purview to promoting just what our mission statement suggests: “provide accredited member schools the resources and competitive environment in education based programs that establish a foundation for excellence based in integrity, sportsmanship, and leadership.”

When the prospect of using the incredible new natatorium at Liberty University for our championship event was proposed to the Board of Directors of the Swimming & Diving Committee, the committee saw another way to help solve the rental problems we have been facing. More so, we saw in the natatorium an opportunity to create a unique and exemplary event for our student-athletes and their families that will leave them remembering the VISAA championship as the highlight of their high school athletic experience. When the prohibition and the rationale behind it was then brought up, the committee lost its spark... and a new one ignited. It seems the discussion of political ideologies left our committee in a position where several felt uncomfortable because our representatives did not know if the decision was, in fact, made by their very own head of school. This small example may, perhaps, reflect what happens when politics enter a space [athletic competition] that has traditionally been very inclusive and aimed at providing student-athletes with the best possible experience. Indeed, if Liberty University did prohibit us from allowing any student-athlete from participation in our event, the Executive Committee of the VISAA would not need to tell us to look elsewhere; such a ban would be in direct contradiction to our mission and vision as representatives of the VISAA. It is, after all, our calling to educate our students about mutual respect, inclusivity, integrity and sportsmanship.

Given that the board of our committee felt the weight of the divisiveness this decision might cause coupled to the original driving force behind our consideration of using the Liberty University natatorium in the first place, I request that the prohibition of our consideration be lifted and we be allowed to consider the venue based on 1) our anticipation of the experience of those in attendance, 2) the economics of the “rental”, and 3) the geography in relation to VISAA members. These 3 points are believed to be mission-centric and give the appropriate amount of attention to our committee’s fiduciary responsibility to the member schools. If we

were to utilize the facility, the rental would not require that we adopt any set of beliefs or any particular ideology; on the contrary it would support the very mission and vision that we coaches on the swimming & diving committee aim to embody.

Personally, I am entering my tenth year as a member of the VISAA Swimming & Diving Committee and my fourth as its President. I felt welcomed by my peers in my first year and still do today and, though we have disagreed about things along the way, I have always felt that our committee aspired to set an example within the VISAA, operated with a sense of harmony in cooperation with each other, and certainly with a respect of the backgrounds represented. It was not until the recent decision made by the Executive Committee along with its rationale were discussed when it seemed we lost some of this harmony and respect. Confusion has replaced that respect and ideology has obscured our sense of what and whom we serve. I am hopeful that we can return to an environment of mutual respect that we have all shared in the past.

Respectfully,

Gregory M. Guldin  
President  
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