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SOME STUDENTS DON'T SEE "anything shady," and others feel as if VCU President Michael Rao "lied to our faces," after it was reported that a consultant in the Navy Hill project ghostwrote Rao's op-ed about the redevelopment.

A public relations consultant for NH District Corp., Jeff Kelley, helped draft the op-ed based on an interview with Rao, according to emails sent by university spokesperson Pamela Lepley. The Richmond Times-Dispatch details emails between Kelley and university relations staff that illustrate the collaboration between the two parties.

"It is normal for public relations professionals to collaborate on projects of mutual interest," Lepley said in a news release. "When VCU was interested in submitting an op-ed on the proposal, Jeff Kelley offered a draft for us to work from based on an interview he had conducted with President Rao."

Journalism professor Bill Oglesby said that while ghostwriting is common practice in the public relations industry, Dominion Energy's gain in the project "brings up the ethical question." Dominion Energy CEO Tom Farrell is also the head of NH District Corp.

"If you think about it, we all understand that public officials have speech writers," Oglesby said. "The unusual part here is perhaps that it

was vetted and to some extent ... [and] was approved by Dominion, the ones who are actually attempting to gain financially by this project."

Oglesby said the "stamp of approval" from Dominion Energy's leadership on the op-ed changes the public's view on the project.

"When you have [Dominion] in effect vetting and putting their stamp of approval on an op-ed piece from the president of VCU, before it even goes out in the newspaper," Oglesby said, "that creates an appearance in the public mind that the fix is in on the project."

Student opinions on the fact that the op-ed was written by the project's developer vary. Freshman Rebecca Pegram said the editing process of the op-ed didn't seem "shady."

"The fact that it looks like they're pretty open about a lot of people going over the op-ed before Rao put his name on it, supports that he didn't just sign his name," Pegram said. "His words, someone else wrote them because they had an interview, I think it was really professional. It doesn't look like there's anything shady."

Activate Virginia, a progressive organization, published emails between Lepley and Daniel Woodward, a member of the university relations staff, that reference Kelley's role in drafting the op-ed. Virginia Public Media reports that Jeff Thomas, an author and opponent of the Navy Hill plan, obtained the records via a Freedom of Information Act request.

Lepley sent the drafted op-ed in an email to Woodward and Teresa Dulaney-Dewald in early December. Lepley said in a second email that Kelley helped draft the post.

"By the way, Jeff Kelley helped draft this based on an interview he did with the president earlier -- so hopefully he has captured Mike's content and voice pretty well," Lepley wrote.

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Bill Oglesby, journalism professor

The messages include multiple drafts of the op-ed, which were published on Jan. 6. "I accepted the offer and the draft was vetted and edited by my communications team and reviewed by the president to make sure it accurately reflected his words and position," Lepley said in a news release.

The Navy Hill Redevelopment plan, which Mayor Levar Stoney introduced almost two years ago, is projected to cost \$1.5 billion and redevelop 10 blocks of downtown.

NH District Corp.'s plan to redevelop the downtown area includes a new arena replacing the Richmond Coliseum, a hotel and affordable housing. The plan still needs approval from City Council, which has an advisory commission devoted to the project.

Former Gov. Douglas Wilder, now a professor at VCU, has challenged the Navy Hill proposal on his personal blog, writing that Stoney's stipulation that \$300 million be set aside in contracts for minority-owned businesses is unconstitutional.

"Stoney admitted I was correct. I told him further that a Richmond case, 'Richmond v. J. A. Croson Co.' decided by the US Supreme Court called such 'set asides' as illegal and unconstitutional," Wilder said in a blog post. "Why has he not publicly stated this? Shouldn't the people be entitled to the FACTS and the TRUTH? Or is this too much to ask of our leaders?"

Some students expressed that the revelations about the op-ed caused them to lose trust in their university president.

"It makes him sound like an untrustworthy person," said sophomore Sydney Hicks. "And it makes it seem like ... somebody else could have ghostwritten for him on something else on another project."

Criminal justice major Brianna Chatman echoed similar sentiments — she said Rao signing off on a published piece he did not write was dishonest.

"I feel like we lose trust in our president," the sophomore said. "Because if he knowingly signed off on this and lied to our faces, then how can we sign off on this?"



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