One of the greatest challenges in higher education today is also one of the greatest opportunities. That is, how will we integrate technology applications into scholarship and research? Academic leaders and faculty members from across the College are deeply engaged in initiatives designed to put the College at the forefront of using 21st Century technology to deliver content to students while remaining committed to maintaining the cherished integrity of the U.Va. experience.

Toward this effort, we are focusing squarely on how technology can improve learning by enhancing the student-teacher relationship, as opposed to replacing it. For instance, our faculty members are looking at new ways to organize their teaching, using technology to enhance student engagement with the material outside of the classroom so as to maximize the time spent together inside of it. In this model, students who spend outside time reading, viewing lectures or listening to podcasts can now spend their classroom time with their professors and peers on solving problems and applying what they have learned. The added benefit here comes in an opportunity for feedback that can correct mistakes of misperceptions before they can impact academic performance.

A pilot program is currently underway to redesign a small number of courses during the 2013 calendar year that will serve as prototypes for integrating learning and technology into teaching and learning. We have created instructional design teams comprised of professors, graduate students, technical staff and undergraduate students who are working independently to experiment with alternative methods to find the most effective designs.

Today we have a handful of courses underway to leverage the University’s partnership with Coursera and to take advantage of their experience, significant infrastructure, and multi-university expertise in a way that accelerates our own thinking and capabilities in this rapidly developing arena.

The College has plans to expand its staffing to support this effort by adding two new positions in instructional design and technologies. Expenses related to these hires, and to supporting the professors who will lead each redesign initiative, will be incremental to today’s budget. Our expectation is that this initiative will quickly and naturally lead to a more comprehensive rollout of course redesigns across the curriculum.

These programs will be accelerated only by private support, and The College Foundation is leading the way through the $5 million New Learning Initiative Fund. Launched last September, the Fund was received an initial pledge of $400,000. While this generous support is sufficient to fund the initial phase of the project, it is clear that the inevitable curriculum-wide expansion of the project will necessitate substantial additional support.

We encourage you to join us in this important effort that will position the College for success in a rapidly changing higher education landscape.