

April 23, 2025

To: Veritas School of Social Sciences Board of Directors and Board of Advisors

Subject: Collective Concerns and Recommendations from Veritas Families

Dear Veritas School of Social Sciences Board of Directors and Advisors:

We write to you as a collective of former, current, and alumni Veritas families who have experienced and observed recurring concerns within the structure, policies, and culture of the Veritas Debate Institute (VDI). Our intent is not to disparage the mission or educational value the program aspires to provide, but rather to elevate shared concerns with the hope of fostering a more just, transparent, and developmentally aligned experience for future scholars and their families. Below, you will find a list of grievances and a good-faith effort to suggest viable and meaningful solutions.

We believe Veritas operates as a symbiotic partnership between leadership and parents. While the program delivers valuable instruction and exposure for scholars, parents play an essential role in enrolling students, funding tuition, facilitating transportation, supporting academic and emotional growth, and endorsing the program to prospective families. This feedback is offered in that same spirit, one of constructive collaboration to strengthen the program for all stakeholders.

Many of us entered the program with great hope, compelled by the promise of academic enrichment, personal growth, global exposure, and a sense of belonging within a prestigious community. However, our collective experiences revealed systemic misalignments that not only undercut those promises but also jeopardize the emotional and financial well-being of families and children, particularly those from communities that the program aims to uplift.

A motto of the program is "Give me a student and I'll give you a scholar." However, the pattern observed suggests that students who already arrive with strong oratory and academic skills are the ones who receive the most support and visibility, while those who need foundational development are allowed to fade into the background. Overlooked students may be especially prevalent for the class of 2024-2025 due to the large enrollment (the largest class ever) and, perhaps, the limited capacity of staff and leadership to fully attend to this large class. Several parents across class years have echoed other concerns, such as abrupt dismissals, lack of communication, and harsh or dismissive treatment of students without adequate due process or support.

### **Our Primary Concerns:**

#### **1. Need for curriculum review and developmental scaffolding:**

Some students struggle with the demands of high-stakes assessments due to inadequate developmental preparation. For instance, a public-speaking assessment months into the program was, for some, their first experience presenting before a large group. This may be due,

in part, to limited opportunities to engage and to be held accountable for formative assignments due to large class size. Organizations claiming to serve a charitable purpose, like education, must do so honestly. If Veritas markets itself as a developmental program but actually favors students who already perform highly in the areas Veritas teaches, this could constitute misleading marketing. A true development program, especially one that identifies as a school at any level, should include:

- Formative assessments and skill-building opportunities.
- Scaffolded instruction based on student readiness.
- Supportive interventions for those with social-emotional challenges, as is customary in both K-12 and higher education institutions.

## **2. Inconsistent feedback loops for parents:**

Parents are often left in the dark regarding student progress and standing within the program, and encouraged to “trust the process.” While student self-advocacy is a core value of Veritas, it must be balanced with appropriate and timely communication with parents, especially when scholars risk suspension, dismissal, or disciplinary action. A robust system of academic and behavioral progress reports would empower families to better support their scholars and engage collaboratively with the program.

## **3. Ambiguity around the Harvard Residency pathway:**

Families are told that not all students will attend the Harvard residency, but it is unclear how those decisions are ultimately made or when they will be communicated. Transparent guidelines, deadlines, and criteria are necessary for families to make informed academic and financial decisions. It should also be made clear to parents that the Harvard program is a summer camp that is open for any student to apply, and that the summer camp is transparent in its acceptance of students with experiences ranging from no public speaking and debate skills to those who are already competitive debaters. This is in opposition to Veritas’ presentation of the Harvard residency as a cutthroat, competitive environment that requires intentional emotional toughening. This representation of the Harvard residency is repeatedly used as the rationale for the program’s inflexibility and sometimes harsh treatment and dismissal of students.

## **4. Financial policy incongruence with mission:**

The policy that permits the dismissal of students without refund and holds families liable for the full tuition, regardless of when dismissal occurs, is deeply troubling. Several families shared that students were dismissed before the end of the program, yet the organization retained all tuition payments or continued to require payment of remaining balances. While the financial commitment is outlined in the handbook and contract, parents could not fully anticipate the inconsistency and abruptness in dismissal procedures, nor the communication limitations of the program. Moreover, this practice stands in direct conflict with the stated mission of promoting equity and economic opportunity for Black and Brown youth. While some families can afford tuition with ease, for many, this financial obligation presents a hardship. Families commit to this hardship with trust in the organization, expecting their investment to be honored and handled with care. Unfortunately, this has not been the universal experience for families with

early dismissals from the program. Retaining full tuition after dismissal, particularly without compelling cause or due process, could be perceived as financially exploitative, especially given the program's charitable mission. This is problematic from a consumer protection and ethical nonprofit governance standpoint.

**5. Lack of financial transparency:**

Families in the 2024-2025 cohort were not informed of the tuition cost (\$14,500) until after their children were accepted into the program, when emotional investment was already high. Solicitation occurred without full disclosure, which may violate truth-in-solicitation principles. This is a disservice to children who may be excited about the program and admitted, but are limited by financial barriers. Furthermore, the additional costs associated with uniforms, travel programs, corporate immersions (\$2,500 to \$8,000), and social functions were not disclosed up front. Furthermore, families are told that the Harvard residency cost is included in tuition, yet if a student is dismissed before attending Harvard, that portion of the tuition is not refunded. This has caused angst for some parents and anxiety and pressure for students to strive toward unclear benchmarks. This lack of clarity contributes to financial strain and undermines trust between families and the program.

**6. Lack of due process and safeguards:**

Students have been dismissed abruptly, sometimes without any engagement with a legal guardian beforehand, in violation of handbook expectations. Dismissals have occurred without formal infractions, documentation, or structured processes for remediation. The absence of a consistent and transparent disciplinary framework creates an environment of uncertainty and fear, particularly for students in the developmental age range of 12 to 17. While the current policies leave room for the leaders' discretion, policies should still be written and executed in an equitable manner that respects both the Veritas organization and families.

**7. Limited transparency in external grievance access:**

The Veritas handbook outlines that grievances unresolved through administration may be escalated to the Board of Advisors. However, current policies do not publicly provide contact information for Board members. This creates an insular process that limits accountability and undermines the stated pathway for grievances. In at least one recent instance, administrative leaders initially withheld access or created barriers to the grievance policy. In this same instance, access to the grievance policy was ultimately provided only once administration approved of the *nature* of the grievance. Blocking the process for any reason violates the organization's own published policies and elicits questions about honest representation and accountability.

**8. Revocation of Veritas affiliation and alumni status:**

The policy that students who do not complete the Harvard residency are not considered alumni effectively erases the time, effort, and growth they may have achieved within the program. Even institutions such as Harvard University recognize individuals who complete portions of their programs as alumni regardless of degree conferral. This blanket disaffiliation causes emotional harm and negates the integrity of the developmental process. Students commit a

significant amount of time to the program, often forsaking sports, holiday travel, social and academic engagements, and other events common among youth. Attendance at Harvard should not be the only benchmark for which participation is honored and alumni status awarded.

#### **9. Absence of a consistent exit process:**

Some scholars who withdraw or are dismissed have been sent abrupt communications without a meeting, feedback, or closure. This is potentially harmful to youth who have created bonds with staff and may regard the staff with great respect. To be cut off swiftly and fully from a community that was presented as a supportive environment is contrary to the well-being of developing youth.

#### **Recommendations and Requests:**

- Conduct a comprehensive review of the nine policy areas listed above.
- The Board should call for a full external evaluation of the program that covers recruitment, enrollment, outcomes, dismissal procedures, and retention. The evaluation should include the perspectives of families of scholars who have successfully completed the program, those who have withdrawn, and those who have been dismissed for a comprehensive and unbiased view of the program. An evaluation will protect the program's integrity while providing feedback to ensure that the program's model is sustainable and garners support from families, donors, and sponsors for years to come.
- Clearly define and publicly share the profile of a successful Veritas student and family to support better alignment during recruitment and admissions. In its marketing, recruitment, and admissions process, Veritas should clarify whether it is a developmental program designed to teach fundamental skills such as oration, critical thinking, and debate to high-achieving students, or whether the program is intended to sharpen students who already demonstrate a strong baseline in these areas. At present, class participation appears to be largely volunteer-based, which benefits students who already possess these skills while leaving others to fade into the background without structured, embedded opportunities to grow. If the program does not include consistent instruction and formative assessment of these fundamentals, then *its admissions process should focus more narrowly on selecting students who are already proficient in them*. This clarity is essential to avoid misleading representations, which could be considered disappointing at best and deceptive at worst.
- Improve financial transparency. Make the financial commitment, including the costs of tuition and optional programming, clear upfront. Restructure tuition such that those not traveling to Harvard are not paying the same fees as those who do. Parents can be told up front that, if their child is selected to attend the residency, there will be an additional cost of a specific amount or, if applicable, that fundraising may cover these costs. Additionally, Veritas' non-profit financial statements should be made available either on the website or distributed to current and prospective parents to facilitate transparency and bolster trust.

Many charitable organizations disclose (and may be required to disclose) key financial information to donors and prospective participants, including program costs and descriptions of how funds will be used.

- Collect and publish anonymized data that compares outcomes among cohorts, including demographic factors, retention rates, and performance benchmarks. This should also include the number of students accepted into the program, the number of scholars who ultimately compete at Harvard, the cumulative attrition rate across the course of the year, the percentage of scholars who receive scholarships, and the average amount of each scholarship.
- Adopt best practices from university-level student affairs and educational programs related to discipline, equity, and student well-being, and tailor them to be developmentally appropriate for the Veritas age groups. Veritas frames its practices as necessary for success at Harvard. Institutions such as Harvard have policies that can be used to model the development and implementation of Veritas' policies. Even without Harvard-level resources, Veritas can borrow from and adopt the spirit of these policies, protocols, and general orientation toward providing the opportunity for students to succeed.
- Publish and implement an updated grievance policy that ensures accessible and accountable resolution options for families. Include the direct contact information of the board members who receive grievances.
- Review and revise refund policies to be fair and aligned with the monetary value delivered to families. This should not be calculated simply by dividing tuition across calendar months. The Veritas program structure includes multiple days of full-day intensives later in the year, along with critical educational components such as the Harvard residency, alumni network access, global travel opportunities, and college application support. These elements are heavily weighted toward the end of the program and beyond, and form a substantial part of the program's value proposition. If students are dismissed before these milestone experiences, the proportion of unused value is far greater than the number of weeks remaining would suggest. The current policy creates a significant financial and emotional loss, particularly when dismissal is sudden or unsupported by due process.
- Prioritize emotional well-being as an integral part of the Veritas experience. Although Veritas is described as a collegiate-level program, scholars remain adolescents and require developmentally appropriate emotional support. Emotional attunement must not be overlooked in pursuit of excellence. Even college students and adults benefit from systems of care, community, and personal encouragement, and students should not always be expected to self-advocate without structured support. Programs serving youth should treat social and emotional development as foundational to achievement, not supplemental. Leverage mental health professionals (including a current board member) to generate high-level ways to support students during the program. More importantly, mental health professionals can equip Veritas staff with developmentally appropriate techniques for

engaging and supporting students, even as staff invite students to a high standard of excellence.

- Establish a streamlined, formal, compassionate exit policy for students who are dismissed or choose to withdraw. This should include a final meeting with Veritas leadership, the scholar, their parent or guardian, and, if the family wishes, a Board representative (parent board, advisory board, or board of directors). Scholars should receive constructive feedback and words of encouragement that support students' self-worth, along with recognition for any growth or progress made during their time in the program. Collecting parent and scholar feedback during this phase can support continuous program development while promoting a respectful and dignified transition. While Veritas leadership has noted that families can request a meeting, this exit meeting should be standard, with the option for families to opt out.

Furthermore, communication shifts between Veritas families in good standing versus families recently dismissed. It is unclear how long the option to meet remains after a family is no longer affiliated with the program. Therefore, an exit meeting should be embedded into the separation process. A compassionate exit process greatly increases the chances that separated families can speak favorably of the program to prospective families.

- Implement a tiered recognition model that allows all scholars, unless their behavior is clearly disruptive or harmful, to complete the Saturday instructional component of the program. Scholars who demonstrate exceptional skill and performance may then earn the opportunity to join the Harvard team and complete the Veritas program with distinction. This approach ensures that all students are given a fair opportunity to finish the curriculum, receive a certificate of completion, and access alumni resources. It preserves the merit-based pathway to Harvard while avoiding an all-or-nothing structure that fails to recognize incremental growth and achievement.
- Issue a formal apology to negatively impacted families who choose to identify themselves. Acknowledge the disruption caused by dismissal or program misalignment, and extend opportunities for redemptive action such as partial tuition refunds or reinstatement options, where appropriate and feasible. These gestures demonstrate humility, restore trust, and uphold the integrity of the Veritas mission.

We make these requests not in opposition to Veritas' vision but in support of better outcomes and experiences for future families. Notably, alumni parents, in particular, are invested in preserving the program's reputation. These recommendations are provided in that spirit. We collectively hope your leadership will take this input seriously and apply it to the ongoing sustainability and evolution of the program, especially as you plan to scale.

Sincerely,

Kameron Sheats, Ph.D., on behalf of concerned former, current, and alumni Veritas families