MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Rich Olson, City Manager
        Angela Cole, Assistant City Manager

Date: March 22, 2019

Re: Discussion – Dialogue among City Council and Local Students Regarding Town & Gown Relations

BACKGROUND:
During the Elizabeth City - City Council Midterm Retreat in February 2019, the attending members discussed and deliberated their adopted goals and established an updated list of Goals and Objectives for the City of Elizabeth City. Among the seven goals and 35 objectives, the Council includes Goal 4, Provide Youth and Senior Activities, Objective 4D, Establish a Council Academy. The target of this objective is to facilitate regular dialogue between the City Council and our local students attending the College of the Albemarle (COA), Mid-Atlantic Christian University (MACU) and Elizabeth City State University (ECSU). Two ideas developing out of the Council retreat are: 1) a Council Academy whereby college and university students would shadow the Council during active session, possibly creating a mock governing body that would recommend policy for local ordinance; and 2) an Elizabeth City Ted Talk / Podcast edition that would publish regular discussion between students and elected officials. During its Midterm Retreat, Council deliberation established neither a deadline, nor a funding source to achieve this objective.
This Work Session agenda item will allow Council and students from all three institutions to dialogue, debate, and vet the ideas presented by the City Council.

ANALYSIS:
Town and gown are two distinct communities of a university town, with 'town' being the non-academic population and 'gown' metonymically being the university community. Towns and cities are defined by their extensive systems for housing, transportation, sanitation, utilities, land use, and communication. Their density facilitates interaction
between people, government organizations, and businesses. College and university campuses (in their traditional sense) are likewise, groupings of human settlement; however, the gathering is to serve a primary purpose – learning and teaching principles of knowledge to youth and young adults. Naturally, conflict is inevitable in university towns, where two separately governed bodies with different priorities and loyalties shared the same restricted space.

It is no secret that universities and the towns in which they reside need to become better dance partners. For years and in other cities small and large, the relationship between town and gown has remained ambivalent. There have been points where a university in crisis has been rescued by the city dynamics surrounding it, while at other times, city developments have threatened to undermine the stability of the university. Conversely, there have been occasions where the university provided a focus and coherence for the cultural life of the city; though at other times, it has withdrawn into itself and undermined urban culture. These institutions have historically stepped on each other’s toes, if not flat-out ignored each other, in the pursuit of separate goals. However, this twosome is unequivocally stronger when working together for the collective, a fact that more and more campuses and communities are waking up to.

The benefits of aligning priorities and cultivating a stronger relationship are plentiful for both sides, including:

- maximized capital and financial resources
- attracting and retaining world-class talent
- driving economic development
- elevating the level of both learning and life

Despite the social and legal battles, universities and host towns have an incentive to cooperate, as the schools require city services and need city approval for long-range plans while the university towns need remuneration for public services provided. The "engaged university" is a recent term describing community partnerships and joint planning with city officials. Additionally, in some college towns, local culture is constructed by students and non-students alike, such as Athens, Georgia, which was ranked as the No. 1 college music town by Rolling Stone Magazine. In Athens, local culture that students identify with and take part in is often supported or created by non-students, in this case, musicians. While some degree of misunderstanding or rivalry might persist between "students" and "townies", coexistence and co-operation take place as well.

Additionally, town–gown parameters may become increasingly difficult to define in the near future. Geography is less salient as a factor in urban higher education in the Information Age. Some institutions rely less on geographical presence, enrolling students in a broad range of online degree programs. Other courses may comprise part-time or night classes for working professionals or intensive training taking place over a group of weekends or months. Many of these non-traditional students live and work full-time in the surrounding community. Traditional brick-and-mortar universities have countered with their own distance education courses via television and the Internet. For small and rural cities like Elizabeth City that are plagued by the internet drought, supporting our
local institutions and their off-campus students with robust and affordable broadband remains an unsolvable challenge.

Many educational futurists argue that the division between town and gown is rapidly fading and that the 21st century is the cusp of another revolutionary educational paradigm. According to these forecasts, the 21st-century college student may well be someone sitting at his or her personal computer miles from a college campus. Graduation may or may not include the traditional commencement ceremony. These reformers argue that the student will be interacting more seamlessly within the global community. Others dismiss these views to a greater or lesser extent, who admit the importance of technology and the diminution in town-gown rivalries but stress the continuing value of traditional (on-campus) learning and teaching methods. Either way, for the Elizabeth City community, maintaining our co-existence with our three institutions of higher education is critical. In 2018, ECSU celebrated their 125th anniversary, was recently designated a NC Promise campus, and is reestablishing unique degree programs emphasizing aviation and technology. The City and ECSU are working this spring to bring online a new Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) facility. MACU has new degree programming slated for 2019, including Human Resource Management Concentration within the existing Business Administration Major, and is expanding their programming and university presence through student sports and academic publication. Just this month, CoA and ECSU have strengthened their intra-campus relationship by signing a co-admission agreement. Additionally, CoA will host its 2nd annual College to Career Signing Day in May. Similar to athletic signings, new students are invited to indicate their intentions to attend CoA by enrolling in a Career and Technical Education (CTE) program. CoA offers a variety of CTE programs ranging from Agribusiness Technology and Computer Integrated Machining, to Early Childhood Education and Surgical Technology.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff is not recommending any action on this agenda item. For information only.