

## **April 2024 BOV Meeting President's Open Session Remarks**

I had planned to open my remarks by acknowledging the student protestors behind me for not interrupting the business of the university, but instead, the group elected to disrupt my remarks with chants that caused us to pause the meeting as they were escorted out of the meeting location.

I am disappointed that these individuals chose to disrupt university business given the latitude that they have been provided for the free expression of their viewpoints. Their First Amendment rights do not extend to suppressing the free speech of others or disrupting the business of the university as executed by the Board of Visitors. No doubt, this is a complex issue that is central to the concept of a university as a sanctuary for free expression and critical inquiry, without which we may fail to advance as a community or as a nation. I believe that to allow the full exploration of difficult and consequential topics the university must, as appropriate, maintain a position of neutrality and focus on supporting members of our community when they experience loss or suffering.

To the Board, I apologize for the interruption. This is why we are devoting so much energy to promoting the skills of constructive dialogue across differences among our students.

We are in the final weeks of the tenure of General Randal Fullhart, the longest-serving Commandant of the Corps of Cadets in our history. The Corps has been transformed under his visionary leadership. His determined but humble leadership style has won over the alumni and the university. We all see the results and will for generations to come as those Randy has mentored make their mark.

Thanks to Ken Miller who will soon begin a well-earned retirement after 36 years at Virginia Tech, most recently as CFO. Ken, your steady and disciplined leadership has kept the university sailing straight through all sorts of challenges, including the pandemic. Thank you!

For the past five years, Virginia Tech has been able to keep tuition increases to half of the consumer price index on average. The old narrative of college tuition being the fastest growing element of a family's budget is no longer true. We have bent the curve. In inflation-adjusted dollars, tuition has been declining, unlike the cost of housing and food. The credit for this reversal is due to efforts of the Board of Visitors, the administration, faculty and staff combined with increasing appropriations by the General Assembly. Today, we approved a tuition increase of 2.9%, slightly below the CPI. I commend the Board for making this decision despite the uncertainty in the state appropriation for the coming biennium. While uncertainty challenges our internal process for setting our budget, that uncertainty is not being passed to our students and families. The result is continued progress toward the goals of the Virginia Tech Advantage, one of our two highest priorities along with Virginia Tech Global Distinction. Both priorities as well as the enabling infrastructure will require significant investments over the coming years. Last month, our leadership group, the President's Council, held a retreat solely focused on identifying cross-cutting opportunities for reinvestments of E&G base budget funding. This effort is on top of reallocations identified within each unit. The retreat helped promote a shared pan-university culture of continually seeking greater effectiveness in the use of our resources to advance the institution's priorities. As you have seen in the data, Virginia Tech has a long history of running lean with a lower fraction of administrative expenditures than peers. But there is always more we can do, and the math shows that we cannot rely solely on new money to move us forward.

As you heard, our admissions process for fall 2024 is robust, with record applications of over 52,000 and deposits so far are strong. Unfortunately, we have two wild cards this year: the impact of the Supreme Court decision ending affirmative action in college admissions, and the delays associated with the roll-out of the new FAFSA application. We have extended the date for accepting offers of admission to May 15 since students expecting federal financial aid do not know what they will be offered. We will keep you informed as this situation unfolds.

Everyone who follows college athletics knows that the situation is unstable and sliding rapidly toward an unconstrained free market for talent. While this is good for some student-athletes, it is not clear when or how the system will

find a new dynamic equilibrium. Let's hope we land in a better place because we know from our 2015 Gallup survey that the experiences of our student-athletes correlate strongly with enhanced well-being in later life. A thriving athletics program is also the economic lifeblood of college towns like Blacksburg. Whit Babcock, Amy Sebring, Kay Heidbreder, and I are working every day, literally, to position Virginia Tech for the strongest possible future in athletics given the constraints that we cannot control. In the meantime, we are celebrating an ACC regular season championship in women's basketball and a promising new coach, Megan Duffy, an NCAA championship for wrestler Caleb Henson, a seventh-place national finish for the wrestling team – highest in the ACC, a 12<sup>th</sup> place finish for men's Track and Field at the NCAA Indoor Championship, and a ninth-place finish for men's swimming and diving at the NCAA Championship, tied for the best finish in program history. And spring football is back!

I'd also like to take a moment to celebrate the achievements of InclusiveVT. We started this effort a decade ago. At that time, it was obvious that the sustainability of Virginia Tech was dependent on broadening interest to communities that were not sending students to Virginia Tech. Our stagnant enrollment demographics were based on shrinking pools of talent, not growing ones, and we were hearing from employers that despite our graduates' reputation for being well-prepared and willing to work hard, we were not known for producing graduates with a high degree of cultural competency. We decided to focus on creating an inclusive campus atmosphere and reaching out to underrepresented and underserved communities in Virginia that had not been sending their most promising talent our way. One of our first steps was to close the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, which had become the "office down the hall," that is, the place that figuratively absolved everyone else of the duty to address our demographic and climate problems. We got everyone engaged in InclusiveVT and wove the effort inextricably into our strategic plan. Once we identified opportunities to support the effort centrally without replacing the distributed responsibilities, we established a new central resource under the direction of Dr. Menah Pratt that focused on efficiency and promulgating best practices. In addition, Enrollment Management took on the task of eliminating unnecessary barriers to applying for admission to Virginia Tech. As a result, we have one of the fastest growing application pools in the country, our entering class has grown

from 13% to 20% underrepresented minority, and we hit the strategic plan milestone of 40% of our entering class from underrepresented or underserved backgrounds (including Pell-eligible, first generation and veterans). While we still do not mirror the diversity of the Commonwealth, we have created a campus atmosphere that is much more conducive to building cultural competencies, and much more welcoming to those who do not share life experiences with the majority population. The value of a Virginia Tech degree is demonstrably greater than it was a decade ago.

Despite all the anti-DEI rhetoric in the country today, I am proud of what we have achieved through InclusiveVT. We have more work to do, especially in affordability and access to bridge experiences including paid internships. Our effort is far from perfect, but we are adaptive learners, and we have countered the narrative that such efforts are not effective.

A topic that has been on the minds of everyone in Higher Education for the past year and a half is Artificial Intelligence, especially generative AI. As a board, you made this your top priority during our August retreat, and I expect that the responsible and effective use of AI will remain near the top of our agenda for the foreseeable future. As you heard from Sharon Pitt, Amy Sebring, and Cyril Clarke in their committee reports, we have initiated the process of appointing and charging an AI Working Group. We have also been engaged with the Virginia Council of Presidents, the Governor's office, and national organizations in developing initial guidelines and identifying opportunities for education and investment. We will keep you posted and engaged as the Virginia Tech plan for implementing and governing AI takes shape.

Go Hokies!