

Board of Visitors Constituency Report  
Leslie Orellana, Undergraduate Representative

November 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup>, 2024

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Good afternoon, Rector Baine, members of the board, President Sands, administration, and guests. Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak to you all once regarding undergraduate students.

Since we last met, students have had an exciting start to their semester! With the addition of renovated War Memorial Gym, the Undergraduate Science Laboratory Building, Hitt Hall, Perry Place, and a revamp of campus transportation with the soon-to-be new transit center – campus and student life looks very different than when I first started here. These changes demonstrate Virginia Tech’s lasting commitment and the board’s contribution to student wellbeing and academics for both current and future Hokies. With that said, there is always progress to be made to keep Virginia Tech a place where students can find their sense of belonging, thrive in this environment, and obtain the diploma and skills they need for their careers, all while truly calling this place “home”.

Over the last 3 months, I have worked to gather student feedback and perspectives by interacting with a variety of student organizations. My goal is to fully comprehend the complexities of student experiences and concerns and work with different organizations, resources, and administrators to address these concerns. The two main areas I have focused on, based on student feedback, are access to finding local or on-campus employment, experiential learning opportunities, and food security. I am excited to share my research thus far as well as some of the amazing progress we have made and will continue to work on for the remainder of my term.

A pressing concern I have heard from students is regarding on-campus dining and food insecurity. First, it is important to recognize and appreciate the work Dining Services have taken on to address issues related to meal plan structures by taking feedback and working with a consulting group. However, a significant concern that persists is the affordability of on-campus dining. While the university has made amazing progress towards providing a variety of high-quality and nutritious meal options, the prices remain disproportionately high. While students and I recognize that the cost of groceries nationally has increased significantly, the prices of items within dining facilities are sold at a premium compared to a local grocery or convenience store.

To illustrate this, I conducted an experiment to see if there were differences in the prices of items sold in dining facilities compared to a convenience and grocery store. When creating my college grocery list, I chose a single serving of instant ramen, a bottle of soda, a box of cereal, a bag of chips, and a box of pop tarts – all of the college student staples. It is important to note that these are quick, casual food items sold that a student may reach for when trying to make their dining dollars or budget last throughout the semester. I also chose to analyze items that are not pre-made meals or made-to-order by dining services to have a fair comparison of items.

When I visited a dining hall, these 5 items together cost me \$30.30. On the other hand, the convenience store sold the identical items for a total of \$19.45, and the grocery store total came out to \$12.65. To break this down further, the same groceries are 139.5% more expensive in a dining hall than a grocery store and 55.7% more expensive than a convenience store. This price disparity may cause financial strain for students who are already struggling to find nutritious and budget-friendly dining options on campus. As we continue to improve campus dining options, I encourage the exploration of additional solutions to ensure students are not forced to pay high premiums for basic food items as we strive to combat food insecurity and maintain the nutritional and financial well-being of students.

Secondly, students have expressed the difficulties of finding quality experiential learning opportunities off and on-campus. Virginia Tech's commitment to experiential learning opportunities does not go unnoticed. With resources and programs in place like the Bridge Experience programs, Career and Professional Development services, undergraduate research, and community engagement, there are a wide variety of opportunities that students can pursue during their time here. It is important to recognize that minority and underrepresented students are disproportionately disadvantaged in obtaining these opportunities. As a first-generation student myself, I have struggled to keep up with my peers in finding the right resources and methods to obtain a quality experiential learning opportunity. However, I have also seen immense benefits to having those experiences such as workplace readiness and confidence. My internships also solidified my passion for my career and is the reason I am pursuing a dual degree, where I gained the confidence to push my own boundaries and aim for success.

On-campus employment has been a topic of concern that many students have voiced. This type of employment offers opportunities to gain the skills that are beneficial and essential to experiential learning opportunities, while providing convenience and flexibility of being right on-campus. Many students have expressed the difficulties with the non-standardization of employment procedures across campus. This issue begins with the hiring process and is throughout the on-boarding, training and time of employment of the student.

Currently there is no policy, procedure, or best practice in place for on-campus employment recruiting. A 2023 study conducted by the Virginia Tech Career and Professional Development found that out of 15 peer and aspirational institutions, 10 have a centralized on-campus employment office. In contrast, Virginia Tech does not; resulting in departments and colleges to independently determine how, or whether, they market their job opportunities campus wide. When positions are not publicly posted using a centralized job platform, like Handshake, it creates an inequitable situation by limiting access to opportunities for students who may not be aware of these positions. Additionally, when departments are solely responsible for the onboarding and training, students have reported challenges in receiving consistent information, support, and preparation to succeed in their roles. This approach can leave some students feeling excluded or disadvantaged, hindering the goal of providing equal experiential learning opportunities to all students.

To address these issues, I am excited to work with Career and Professional Development to explore and develop additional support and assistance to provide equitable resources to all students. In addition, I am also looking forward to continuing our collaborative work in reassessing career fairs on campus to truly understand student and employers' needs and concerns. My mission is to truly make Virginia Tech a place where students can thrive academically and feel supported and ready for the first step in their career upon graduation. I am grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with such an amazing and dedicated group within Career and Professional Development and am excited to share progress and additional updates soon.

Overall, I am confident that with the ongoing collaboration and feedback, we can continue to make strides towards creating a more accessible, equitable, and supportive campus environment for all students. Thank you for your time, commitment, and incredible support of students and the advancement of Virginia Tech. As we close out this year, I am excited to provide additional updates in the Spring semester! Thank you, and Go Hokies!

**Graduate & Professional Student Constituency Report**  
**Virginia Tech Board of Visitors**  
**November 18 – 19, 2024**

**Presented by William Poland, Graduate & Professional Student Representative**

Rector Baine, members of the Board of Visitors, President Sands, Provost Clarke, EVP Sebring, administrators, and guests. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you all about the graduate and professional students today.

Firstly, I'd like to start by providing an update on the graduate student resource fair that I hosted on September 12<sup>th</sup>. In total, we had 32 university services represented at the fair, which was attended by over 100 students. The feedback received from both the students and the groups attending was very positive. I think this event was a great success and I am looking forward to hosting another resource fair at the start of the spring semester.

Staying on the topic of resources, another initiative that I have begun working on is updating the 'vt.edu/resources' website, which is an online list of links to resources for Virginia Tech students. For context, this website receives over 7000 monthly views in peak months. While we certainly have students visiting this webpage, it has not been kept up to date and so is not reflective of all the services currently available to students. I have been working to get this website updated and improved so that it can be more useful to students.

Moving on to governance related updates, the working group that I was participating in for simplifying graduate student stipends steps has completed its work and developed a set of recommendations. This working group aimed to simplify the administrative backend of the pay table for graduate student stipends. The group recommended simplifications for this table, which will be presented to the board at a future meeting.

I'd like to also mention a resolution that the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) has been working on. GPSS is proposing the creation of a working group that will look at ways to more effectively address issues such with academic bullying, retaliation, and conflicts of interest. These are some issues that impact our graduate students, but do not necessarily have a unified policy or process for being handled. While I have not personally worked on this resolution, I am glad GPSS is collaborating with students, faculty, and staff to move it forward.

Next, I'd like to share some insights into my constituent populations. I have spent the past couple of months reaching out to different segments of our graduate and professional students. I have had meetings with Deans and Vice Presidents representing our medical students, veterinary students, and graduate students across our DC, Roanoke, and of course Blacksburg campuses. Likewise, I have connected with student representatives for each of these groups. From my meetings, there were a couple of recurring themes that I would like to bring up.

Firstly, for Blacksburg graduate students, one concern I've heard is the lack of housing options near Blacksburg for graduate students that have families. A large portion of our graduate student population is non-traditional students, who may be returning to school after years in other careers. Around 15% of graduate students at VT may have a spouse and/or children. While Virginia Tech has planned to expand on-campus housing in the university master plan with the future student life village, this does not include any accommodations for students with families. In comparison, some of our peer institutions like UVA and Purdue provide family-friendly housing options on-campus in an apartment-style offering. This is something that Virginia Tech should consider adding to remain an attractive university for applicants with families.

Secondly, focusing on graduate students not in Blacksburg, one theme I noticed was a sense of separation and weaker connection to the university. Physical distance, intensive workloads, and lack of a broader community outside of individual programs seemed to be a few contributing factors to this. This is not to say that these students feel isolated, but that they may have a stronger connection to their individual graduate programs, while the sense of "being a Hokie" is secondary. I believe we must continue working hard to instill "Hokie spirit" in all of our students, as that is what makes the culture of Virginia Tech so special.

Thirdly, I'd like to bring attention back to resource accessibility and awareness. Especially when I spoke with people from the Roanoke and DC campuses, resource accessibility was a big topic that I kept hearing about. While Virginia Tech has been making good efforts to improve the resources available to students (such as Hokie OneStop in northern VA and services from Blacksburg visiting Roanoke), students and administrators both stress that more support is needed. For example, current graduate students in Roanoke may have to commute to Blacksburg to pick up their student ID, and students in northern VA may have to commute hours to get to a student ID pickup site. Often, online and digital resources are the easiest way to reach these students, but they are not always accommodating – for example, websites telling students to visit a building in Blacksburg to resolve an issue, instead of having options to accommodate non-local students. My point is that as we continue to expand and put emphasis on our northern VA campus, we must be conscious that these students will require tailored solutions to support them that will be different from Blacksburg.

In closing, I encourage the Board members, to keep the issues of: (1) Awareness and access to student resources and services, (2) Family housing options for non-traditional graduate students, and (3) community-building for non-Blacksburg students, in mind. Our graduate and professional students represent an integral part of our university that enables teaching, research, and furthers our goal of global distinction. To attract and retain top graduate and professional student talent, we must continue to support this population.

Thank you.

Board of Visitors Constituency Report  
Leslie Orellana, Undergraduate Representative  
August 26<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup>, 2024

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Good afternoon, Rector Baine, members of the board, President Sands, administration, and guests. First, I want to thank you all for this opportunity to share my own experiences but also to speak to you all regarding a wide variety of student prospectives. Your continuous efforts to make Virginia Tech a place where students can excel is very appreciated by every single student.

I am excited and grateful to be able to collaborate with you all to continue this mission together as the undergraduate student representative this year. To introduce myself, my name is Leslie Orellana, and I am going into my fifth year at Virginia Tech. I recently received a bachelor's degree in real estate last year and will be continuing aiming to receive another bachelor's degree in building construction this year. My dual degrees and time here have given me the opportunity to challenge myself not only academically but also within my own personal growth, especially in leadership. I joined Hokie Ambassadors my first year to find a group of passionate students and share our excitement of Virginia Tech with others. Serving as president of Hokie Ambassadors allowed me to recognize the difficult decisions students must make each day to pursue their education. One instance of this was when I was approached by a prospective student after a campus tour and she shared that she, like myself, was a first-generation college student. She was lit up with excitement as the tour ended but her excitement was clouded with the difficult question of if Virginia Tech was worth the financial stress it would bring. It was an impossible question that no one prepares for. I told her of course and shared my experience of working jobs during the semester, the financial aid process, and her options for financing— but this is a difficult choice every student must make for themselves. Her story and many others inspired me to continue the work to make Virginia Tech accessible and affordable for all students.

This year I hope to not just magnify my own experiences and prospectives but to also shed light on the issues that are prevalent in the student body and share their successes. The issues that will be in my focus will be accessibility to experiential learning experiences, affordability, the rising cost of living, and food insecurity. While these topics are broad, diving deeper will demonstrate the immense positive impact we can implement to help students.

In my role as the undergraduate representative, I have met with all the deans of the colleges to collaborate on different issues and brainstorm ideas. An issue I brought up with every dean was

the idea of experiential learning. While experiential learning looks different for every student and can mean conducting research in a lab, an internship, volunteering at Virginia Tech's farms or clinics, or even getting involved in a student organization's leadership – every single person spoke to the importance of this experience. The issue lies in the accessibility of it. Not only are students striving to find the perfect opportunity to advance the skills taught in the classroom but also are tasked to finding and funding temporary housing, transportation, groceries, necessities, and even some students saving of their earnings for tuition or other semester expenses. This makes the experiential learning experience difficult to consider for students which may hinder some students from pursuing it, despite the colleges emphasis on the benefits to their students. I hope to use this year to work with various campus resources, organizations, and colleges to ensure every student has the opportunity to obtain these experiences despite their socioeconomic status or other constraints.

This year, we have also witnessed the cost-of-living rise as groceries, daily necessities, and interest rates continue to increase as a result of the national rise of inflation. While I, as well as all the students, appreciate the Board of Visitor's continuous efforts to keep tuition increases conservative at only 2.9% for this school year, the financial burden of attendance continues to grow. Off-campus housing in Blacksburg can easily be at minimum \$700 and upward of \$1500, with luxury apartments being the newest and most popular ones to be marketed. I hope that the Board of Visitors can explore additional solutions to housing for students that are beyond the first year guaranteed on-campus housing. We are also witnessing an increase in the cost of groceries and items that may leave a student struggling to find affordable options for daily necessities. Food accessibility has previously been tackled by my predecessors, but I hope to continue this mission as no student should have to worry about their accessibility to food or other essentials.

Overall, I am excited for this school year to work with a variety of students, administration, resources, and organizations to understand the student body and their needs. Virginia Tech is the place where so many people find their friends, dream careers, and the support to always call this place home and I am excited to continue that for generations to come. I thank you all for your continued support and for all you do for the advancement of Virginia Tech and Go Hokies!

**Graduate & Professional Student Constituency Report  
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors**

**August 26 – 28, 2024**

**Presented by William Poland, Graduate & Professional Student Representative**

Rector Baine, members of the Board of Visitors, President Sands, Provost Clarke, administrators, and guests. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you all about the graduate and professional students today.

I am so excited to be delivering my first report as the Graduate and Professional Student Representative to the Board. A bit about me: I am a second year master's student studying electrical engineering and working as a graduate research assistant at the Virginia Tech National Security Institute. I am a lifelong Hokie as I grew up in Blacksburg and received my undergraduate degree in electrical engineering from Virginia Tech as well. Having much love and passion for Virginia Tech, I am eager to step into this role and advocate for our students.

The graduate and professional students are an integral part of the university, particularly in supporting our faculty's research efforts, which help distinguish Virginia Tech as an excellent university. By cultivating a desirable student experience, we can attract talented students that will enable the university's research goals and advance our work as a land-grant university. However, the graduate and professional student population is very diverse and there is rarely a one-size-fits-all answer to support all our students. This means that we must be deliberate and thoughtful in looking at our student population and understanding how to best support them.

In my role this year, I look forward to engaging with students and administrators across the university to work to improve the student experience for our graduate and professional student population. Some aspects of the student experience that are of interest to me include: graduate student well-being, access to and awareness of resources, international student experience, and supporting students across our multiple campuses. I have already begun to work with others on some of these issues, which I will now detail.

Following conversations from the previous board meeting in June on the complexity of the pay table for graduate student stipends, I was asked to join a working group on simplifying the graduate student stipend pay steps. Alongside administrators from the graduate school and finance department, I have already had two meetings with this working group, and I am very encouraged by the ideas and progress we have made. Currently, the group is finalizing a set of simplifications to the stipend pay table and will be reaching out to relevant stakeholders across university departments that manage graduate student contracts to receive feedback on the proposed changes.

I have also received an invitation to and am very excited to be a part of the steering committee for the Local Visioning Initiative. This group is composed of members from the university, as well as officials from the towns of Blacksburg and Christiansburg, Montgomery County, and other New River Valley Stakeholders. The goal of this initiative is to explore further partnerships between Virginia Tech and the surrounding region and develop a shared vision for prosperity in our local community. As both a representative to the Board of Visitors and as a Blacksburg native, this is an effort that I am extremely interested in and look forward to supporting.



This past week, I also spoke at the Graduate School Orientation and introduced myself to new graduate and professional students who are beginning their time at Virginia Tech. This opportunity allowed me to increase the new students' awareness of what the Board of Visitors is and how I can support and advocate for them.

The orientation also gave me a chance to promote an event that I have been working very hard to plan, which is the Graduate Student Fall Resource Fair. This is an event that my predecessor began last spring which I wanted to continue in the fall as an opportunity to expose new, incoming students to all the resources and services that Virginia Tech has to offer. This event will take place on September 12<sup>th</sup> outside on the Graduate Life Center Lawn and is in collaboration with the Graduate School and the Graduate and Professional Student Senate. The resources represented at the fair will be diverse, ranging from student well-being to transportation services to professional development and more. I'm very pleased to say that there are over 30 groups planning to attend this event, which is an increase compared to the previous event in the spring, meaning that we will be giving more visibility to additional resources.

In the coming months, I look forward to continuing this work, as well as beginning to meet with other student groups such as the Order of the Gavel and the entire Graduate and Professional Student Senate to hear what is on the minds of our graduate and professional students. I am also planning to connect with the Deans of the Graduate School, Medical School, and Veterinary School, as well as representatives for our other campus so that I may gain a broader understanding of how to best serve our graduate and professional students for the coming year.

Overall, I am very excited for the work to come this year and I pledge to do my best to collaborate with you all in support of our students. On behalf of the graduate and professional students, thank you for listening today.