

Undergraduate Constituency Report to the Board of Visitors

Thomas Feely
November 18, 2025

Good morning, Rector Rocovich, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Board, President Sands, EVP & Provost Clarke, EVPCOO Sebring, and members of the Hokie community gathered with us today.

I am honored to be with you once again on behalf of my peers.

When we last convened, I committed to both representing the thoughts and feelings of my constituents and also helping them to digest the executive-level decisions made at this institution.

I am pleased to report that we have had constructive dialogue and have enhanced understanding. It is essential, as you are aware, to recognize that acceptance does not necessarily imply agreement.

Through this experience, I have gained a deeper understanding of significant opportunities to influence Virginia Tech, both for those currently on campus and for those to come.

Shared understanding, the value of community spaces, and preparation for post-undergraduate studies have been the main themes of my engagements.

Transparency with decision-making.

There is stronger trust from the students in the institution when decision makers are honest about the rationale and basis for decisions. For example, when President Sands acted outside the scope of shared governance under exigent circumstances, there was understanding due to the surrounding supporting documentation and transparency. Students felt a lack of trust when other programs were discontinued, and the references to the external forces were neither distributed nor verbally cited. Once I requested information and shared it with my peers, they then understood why decisions had been made once the facts were presented.

On-Campus Housing

On the topic of our campus community, our residents are grateful for the renewed focus on providing a modern living experience on par with the best of what our facilities have to offer and comparable to peer institutions. Important to couple with this acknowledgement is the need to find an appropriate balance between the pace of renovations and new construction to keep the cost of attendance manageable. It is no secret that right now, institutions must justify the value of the collegiate experience to ensure that there is a financial return on investment, and opportunity for civil discourse and personal development for young people in America, who are debating where to go and what to do after high school. To put it another way, we cannot price ourselves out of the market as the affordable and accessible land-grant that we pride ourselves on being.

Within these residential spaces, it is imperative to have adequate space for collaboration and community building.

In an effort to represent the student voice more accurately, I established an advisory committee for this position, comprised of students from across the University whose paths I ordinarily wouldn't cross. This has allowed me to draw lessons from experiences unlike my own and ask questions I would not have otherwise considered regarding the student experience. We can discuss how the Board defines "student success", but in the context of our group of successful students, I sought to peel back the layers of their success to see if there were defining moments, opportunities, or experiences.

A common theme emerged across the table, as students attributed their success to the connections they made during their first year at Virginia Tech. For many, it was an experience with an upperclassman sharing their journey and providing mentorship in a residence hall. Helping with course selection, homework, and offering advice on which social and professional clubs to consider were key pieces of information that students learned early in their Hokie experience in these spaces.

Part of the value of a Hokie is the down-to-earth, hardworking, "How can I help?" attitude. These attributes and the embodiment of the Pylons are developed through living with and looking up to mentors who live by these values.

The Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets has, of course, been here since our beginning and is considered the premier Living-Learning Program (LLP) at Virginia Tech. It is the reason why thousands of Hokies, including myself, come to Tech. The director of Living-Learning Programs shared with me that they have worked to understand what makes the Corps so effective and provide parallel aspects in the other LLPs. Speaking as someone who has both been a cadet and currently lives in a civilian LLP, I see the value in these programs and the efforts the staff make to develop engaging programs that foster community. I can tell you that if it were not for the Corps, I would not have come to Virginia Tech. This program has transformed me into the person I am today, and I almost certainly would not be standing before you without these experiences. As we speak, students with parallel experiences are developing across campus, and it is our responsibility to ensure that first-year networks are supported. This way, when students move off campus or return to on-campus housing, they can carry these relationships forward and continue to benefit from and provide mentorship to others.

Bridging the Gap between undergraduate studies and what comes next is an ongoing area of discovery for my team.

We have learned about the Virginia Talent + Opportunity Partnership (V-TOP), a program that connects Virginia businesses offering work-based learning opportunities with students seeking them, in partnership with higher education institutions. This program provides resources to help businesses start internships, learn internship best practices, recruit for and fill their positions, with some employers qualifying for wage matching to further support students.

Additionally, the Ut Prosim Internship Support Fund supports students in unpaid and underpaid internships that benefit the Commonwealth. These funds contribute to housing, relocation, transportation, and other expenses during their experience.

One of the main points for the Investment to Win was the impact that Hokie Sports has on the community vitality. This comes at a cost of over \$1,000 per student per year by 2029. A great way for the community to buy into this partnership is to consider part-time student interns. This benefits students' experience and development while strengthening ties with Virginia Tech and the community.

A great relationship within Virginia Tech is the Homefield Farm, a partnership between CALS and Student Affairs. The twelve-acre, student-driven farm is the only certified organic operation owned by a university in Virginia. It provides about 45,000 pounds of fresh produce to dining centers and Homefield's farm stands on campus. These educational experiences, coupled with the tangible benefits to the campus, are prompting us to explore other opportunities for similar partnerships.

The Campus Internship Experience program I mentioned in the last meeting developed 93 on-campus internship opportunities for students for this academic year, all of which are paying.

Internships can be challenging to secure for first- and second-year students who lack relevant skills or experience. Fortunately, we have phenomenal spaces, like the Build Lab, which allows anyone who has completed the safety training to use this fully equipped wood shop. Or the maker spaces in the library, which can bring ideas to life through art, additive manufacturing, laser cutting, and many other resources. Most recently, the Discovery Lab opened in the Undergraduate Science Lab Building, which I encourage you to visit. It has cutting-edge equipment and wet labs that even impressed the research faculty with whom I was touring. All students have to bring is curiosity, and the student lab staff will help advise them on their journey, giving them experience that will help them take the next step.

Dining Plans

Following up on a topic from our last meeting, student focus groups, and I have had the opportunity to collaborate with Dining regarding the future of student plans. They provided me with a preview of the new plans they plan to pilot and present to the BOV in the spring, and if approved, to implement in the Fall of 2026. This will provide a dining plan that enhances food security for our first-year students. Growth plan

When considering undergraduate enrollment at our Blacksburg campus, it is essential to remember who we are and what makes us unique. It was reassuring yesterday to know that we can look forward to exploring sustainable models in the future that do not compromise student experiences or potentially lead us to outgrow our identity.

Information Technology

There are two touch points that the University has with each student each day, regardless of campus or course modality. They are our learning management system, Canvas, and our Microsoft accounts, which include our emails and accompanying software suite. The Microsoft storage that students are allotted is inadequate for an R1 institution with such a heavy STEM focus. I recognize that the Microsoft contract was on the agenda for the previous meeting, and if I had known more, I would have tried to influence this restriction before it came to you for approval. Unfortunately, the Division of IT has informed me that we cannot increase the 10 GB storage limit for students. Nor can students pay for our own expansion. Instead, we have to shuffle data between our personal and school accounts. Therefore, we are going through the shared governance structure of the University to ensure that this issue is addressed for the next contract. Additionally, my team is looking into collecting data to better define the scope of the population impacted.

Thank you, Mr. Pearson, Secretary McCarthy, Rector Rocovich, President Sands, Ms. Heidbreder, and all those who played a role in helping Coach Franklin become a Hokie. We appreciate the support of the Hokie community as we invest to win. We look forward to the athletic department being a good steward of student fees and philanthropic support as we embark on this next chapter of Hokie Sports.

Please let me know if you have any questions at this moment, or if you would like to discuss them at or before our next meeting.

It is my greatest honor to stand before you on behalf of the 31,536 undergraduates of Virginia Tech. Thank you once again for this opportunity.

Thank you, and go Hokies!

Thomas Feely

Graduate & Professional Student Representative Constituent Report

Virginia Tech Board of Visitors Meeting, November 17-18, 2025

Katherine Drinkwater Gregg

Rector Rocovich, Members of the Board, President Sands, Provost Clarke, EVP Sebring, Faculty, Staff, Students, and Guests,

It is my pleasure to speak to you today in Academic Building One during my first visit to Virginia Tech's Institute for Advanced Computing. Over the last two days, I have thoroughly enjoyed exploring this campus, speaking with students and administrators, and learning about this important node in our Innovation Network.

As I reviewed my activities over the last three months and our agenda for this Board meeting, a theme which stuck out to me was student belonging and connection. In my PhD program, I have read many scholarly works that emphasize the profound impact of sense of belonging on student success [1], [2]. I doubt, however, that you need me to list journal articles to understand the impact of belonging on students across all demographics. A student who feels accepted, included, and supported in their learning environment is more likely to learn, contribute, and succeed in that environment. I believe Virginia Tech currently works diligently to help students foster their sense of belonging, from orientation programs to thousands of events hosted every year to our strong institutional culture. However, student loneliness, isolation, and disengagement are issues that still affect a majority of students on college campuses [3]. Furthermore, many of the agenda items we've discussed during this meeting could have a significant impact on the belonging of graduate students at Virginia Tech. Thus, I will spend the remainder of my report focusing on a few of those topics.

Connecting All Virginia Tech Campuses and Students

Hosting this meeting in Northern Virginia provides the perfect opportunity to discuss the student experience for those beyond the Blacksburg Campus. About 30% of graduate and professional students do not study in Blacksburg, with online students as the largest population (~1,260). While growth in the greater D.C. area has brought attention to students outside our main campus, the experiences of our students across Virginia vary widely. As I meet with student leaders across Virginia Tech, I wonder what it means to be a Hokie. What are the common experiences, values, or knowledge that we want all students to have before they graduate? How can our different physical locations develop unique identities while maintaining common elements of the Virginia Tech experience? You might say, for example, that every VT student should live out Ut Prosim through service or leadership outside of class. In Blacksburg, every graduate student organization in Blacksburg can request more than \$10,000 per year for operating and event costs to serve their fellow students. The GSA in Northern Virginia, however, has access to only \$2000 of funding from the Graduate School to serve nearly 800 students. While these differences are due to varying student fee structures on different campuses, the

ultimate impact is a very different student experience. Students in Roanoke pay the same fees as Blacksburg students because they are within 50 miles, but these students often lack the navigational resources to access valuable services and engaging events.

For me, simple experiences like wearing my favorite Virginia Tech sweatshirt or walking by the Pylons on the way to my office make me feel like a Hokie. We need to work to ensure that similar quintessential experiences are available at every VT campus for every student.

Ensuring All Students Have a Place that Feels Like Home

Virginia Tech is a large community with lots to offer. The breadth of spaces, resources, people, and services available to graduate and professional students is astounding. In the last month alone, I have had my resume reviewed by Career and Professional Development, learned about the importance of rich relationships at a Student Affairs event, taken advantage of health resources at Shiffert, and found free snacks in as many places as possible. I learned more about the dedication and tireless work of 28 campus offices through the Graduate Student Resource Fair in September. It was incredible to watch dozens of grad students navigate the fair, finding academic, wellness, and community resources. One student was ecstatic about finding a table that was giving out VT branded tape measures because the tape measure would help him learn to think about dimensions in inches and feet. A seemingly insignificant piece of swag made this student feel more comfortable and confident in their community.

I believe that this somewhat silly example from the resource fair exemplifies the purpose of our student support infrastructure. We provide different spaces, events, and opportunities to create many smaller communities within the Virginia Tech community. The tape measure was not an interesting giveaway for all students—I already have a few at home. But for that student, it was perhaps the most valuable thing he took away from the resource fair. His needs were seen and met. His participation and inclusion in the graduate community at Virginia Tech matters. Now, I am not saying that we should give every student a tape measure when they arrive on campus. I am saying that it is paramount that every student can find their own sense of belonging and mattering. For some, it may be their favorite table to study in the Learning Loft at Academic Building One. For another student it may be attending Tea at Two in the ADIPA+ center every week or playing games in the common areas of their Living Learning Program. For me, it's attending Friday morning coffee and pastries in my department. Every student does not only deserve a place where they feel safe, supported, and important, they need it to succeed.

As we discuss enrollment strategy, strategic priorities, and the future of Virginia Tech, maintaining the quality and robustness of our student support is imperative. The infrastructure that supports student life is far bigger than housing, particularly for graduate and professional students. I hope that we can grow in a manner that maintains and bolsters the student experience without straining our capacities.

Caring for Every Hokie from Day 1 to Graduation and Beyond

With the end of the semester and Fall Commencement approaching, I will conclude by celebrating the 525 graduate students who completed their degree over the Summer, and the 921 who are finishing this semester [4]. These students have put hundreds of hours into courses, projects, theses, dissertations, teaching, and more. The road to graduation can be bumpy, and strong belonging and connection is a key predictor of persistence. In the 2025 Graduate Climate Survey, 30% of respondents indicated that they had considered leaving their program in the last year. A GPSS working group and the Graduate School are currently analyzing the survey data to understand this number, but it is clear to me that we have some work to do to support students completing graduate degrees. I believe the common experiences and holistic support I have already spoken about are directly connected to this goal. Furthermore, the importance of belonging continues as students become Hokie alumni. Students who have a strong sense of belonging while on campus are more likely to be involved in their alma mater as alumni, both philanthropically and voluntarily [5].

The bottom line is that fostering belonging for everyone on our campus starts on Day 1 and continues long after they graduate and move on. This is a difficult task, but I think that Virginia Tech is already doing a remarkable job. We must ensure that we continue to move the needle forward rather than slipping backward. I look forward to working on this with you for the remainder of the semester and in the new year. Thank you!

Works Cited

- [1] K. Allen, M. L. Kern, D. Vella-Brodrick, J. Hattie, and L. Waters, “What Schools Need to Know About Fostering School Belonging: a Meta-analysis,” *Educ Psychol Rev*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 1–34, Mar. 2018, doi: 10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8.
- [2] T. L. Strayhorn, *College Students’ Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2018. doi: 10.4324/9781315297293.
- [3] A. Rock, “65% of College Students Are Lonely, New Report Finds,” *Campus Safety Magazine*, May 23, 2024. Accessed: Nov. 13, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/news/65-of-college-students-are-lonely-new-report-finds/135281/>
- [4] J. Austin, *Personal Correspondence*. Nov. 13, 2025.
- [5] N. D. Drezner and O. Pizmony-Levy, “I Belong, Therefore, I Give? The Impact of Sense of Belonging on Graduate Student Alumni Engagement,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 753–777, Aug. 2021, doi: 10.1177/0899764020977687.

Thomas Feely

Board of Visitors Undergraduate Representative Constituent Report

20 August 2025

Good day, President Sands, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Board of Visitors, and members of the Hokie community gathered with us today. My name is Thomas Feely, and I am honored to represent the undergraduate students of this extraordinary institution.

This role is the capstone of my Hokie experience. I believe that my roles as Regimental Commander of the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets and officer in charge of the Eagle Scout Association, Communications Officer, New Station Project Manager, and Member at Large of the Virginia Tech Rescue Squad, ambassador and Associated Schools of Construction competitor for the Myers-Lawson School of Construction, Student Leader (Resident Advisor) for Residence and Well Being, University Building Official intern, and Defense Civilian Training Corps scholar have led me to where I am today prepared to lead and trusted to serve. I look forward to providing a broad perspective coupled with the input of the undergraduate body.

Many of my peers have enhanced this community, the Commonwealth, our country, and abroad over the past few months through internships, competitions, mission trips, military training, and study abroad programs, among other experiences.

Following up on foci from my predecessor, Miss Orellana, and matters from previous meetings, I intend to provide updates on the following topics throughout my term:

1. Residential Facilities

- a. We need to remain conscious of how maintenance nests into the masterplan. When planning new facilities, we should be explicit about how we consider the lifecycle of the core and shell, as well as budget for the lifecycle of systems. It is encouraging to have a plan to move forward and create swing space to take our more senior facilities offline, properly rehabilitate or replace them, and provide future classes of Hokies with a more modern experience on par with other on-campus and off-campus accommodations.

2. Dining Costs

- a. Dining Services heard concerns from and worked with students relating to the current dining plan structure. After engaging with a consultant and

student focus groups, their work has been reviewed by University leadership and will be presented for consideration by the Board at a future meeting.

3. Transition from Undergraduate Studies to Post-Graduation
 - a. Career development
 - i. Campus internEXP is an internal program to get students connected to on-campus work, enhancing experiential learning and developing employability skills to help our graduates compete for and secure careers to bridge the transition.
 - ii. I intend to investigate how we can leverage the Virginia Tech Innovation Network, strengthening experiences and opportunities for the Blacksburg campus students.
4. Topics of Discussion from Constituents
 - a. Employee Appreciation Day annually excludes student wage workers.
 - b. In the current climate, it is imperative to maintain our identity as a land grant institution and senior military college of the 21st century.
 - c. Research conducted at Virginia Tech continues to receive national recognition and contributes to our Global Distinction.
 - d. The Undergraduate Student Senate and Commission on Undergraduate Student Affairs have developed a course for students, approved by Parking Services, to enhance education regarding parking policies. In exchange for successfully completing this course, Parking Services has agreed to adjust certain first-time infractions.
 - e. The class of 2029 is set to have students from 47 states and 77 countries, with 606 international students. Each undergraduate brings a unique background that contributes to our Global Distinction.

This introductory report is strictly informative with no proposed courses of action.

While I have spent much of my time developing within the Corps of Cadets, the Virginia Tech Rescue Squad, and the Myers-Lawson School of Construction, I am eager to advocate for my undergraduate peers at large to help inform decisions made at this table and assist my peers in digesting the outcomes of these meetings.

Thank you for your time, I look forward to working with you throughout the next year.

In the spirit of Ut Prosim,

Thomas Feely

Graduate & Professional Student Constituent Report

Virginia Tech Board of Visitors Meeting, August 18-20, 2025

Katherine Drinkwater Gregg, Graduate & Professional Student Representative

Rector Rocovich, Members of the Board of Visitors, President Sands, Provost Clarke, administrators, faculty, staff, students, and guests,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you as the representative for the nearly 8,000 graduate and professional students at Virginia Tech. I am incredibly excited to spend the next academic year listening to, learning from, and advocating for my fellow students.

To give you a little background on my journey to VT, I grew up in Reno, Nevada as a curious kid who loved learning. Eager to explore a different part of the country, I attended Duke University for my undergraduate degree where I studied Mechanical Engineering. What excited me most about engineering school was the challenge of working on interdisciplinary teams to solve complex, sociotechnical problems. I wondered how universities could better prepare engineers like me to design solutions to ever-changing, real-world problems. When I learned there were graduate programs in Engineering Education that studied these same questions, I knew this was the path for me. I am now a third-year PhD candidate in the department of Engineering Education and an MS student in Mechanical Engineering. I chose Virginia Tech for graduate school for three reasons: 1) a top-ranked Engineering Education program housed within a distinguished College of Engineering, 2) a strong sense of community and school pride, and 3) many opportunities to gain experience with teaching, research, and service. The fact that my younger brother was an undergraduate student who could show me around Blacksburg didn't hurt either. I can confidently say that I would make the same choice again.

I share these details about myself to contextualize my perspective as a graduate student. My experiences in other educational environments help me identify differences and opportunities here at VT. But, of course, my perspective is only one of thousands of graduate students that come from every corner of the world and study disciplines across all realms of knowledge. When I meet graduate and professional students, I am continuously astounded at the breadth of their accomplishments, interests, and goals. We come to Virginia Tech to gain knowledge, skills, and relationships that will further our careers, but graduate and professional students give back to the Hokie community in innumerable ways. I would like to highlight some of those impacts for you today.

Graduate and undergraduate students are often discussed as separate, but graduate and professional students have a profound impact on the development of undergraduates. Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) provide one-on-one instruction, experiential laboratory learning, and detailed feedback on assignments. Notably, 162 graduate Hokies served as Instructors of Record in Fall 2024¹, meaning they are responsible for independently teaching courses on top of their

¹ Source: Dr. Aimee Surprenant, Dean of the Graduate School

own coursework and research. For example, my friend, Marin Fisher, a fourth-year PhD candidate, is currently preparing to teach two sections of ENGE1215: Foundations of Engineering. She will be the first engineering instructor that students encounter at VT and has the responsibility of mentoring 144 students as they discover what it means to be an engineer. Other VT graduate students are using their skills across the commonwealth through the VT Teaching Fellows program. This partnership with Northern Virginia Community Colleges allows advanced graduate students to teach community college courses in their discipline. Teaching Fellows represent the best of Virginia Tech to community college students who may hope to transfer to a 4-year institution while bolstering their teaching resumes and increasing access to higher education across Virginia. Beyond these formal programs, graduate and professional students constantly engage in informal mentoring of undergraduates. Whether as supervisors of undergraduate research, consultants in the writing center, or residential well-being student leaders, graduate students are active in all aspects of the undergraduate student experience. It is essential that we ensure graduate students have the time, energy, and financial ability to engage in this impactful mentoring.

Despite the myriad backgrounds of graduate and professional students, we all saw something in Virginia Tech that made us think, ‘this is home.’ We care for this campus and community like it is our home by making it welcoming to all, upholding our Principles of Community, and striving to leave it better than when we came. Graduate students do this work voluntarily through student organizations, the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS), and individual projects. The Graduate Honor System, which upholds academic integrity in an increasingly challenging environment, is run almost entirely by graduate students. This system educates our academic community about how to write with integrity in addition to addressing cases of misconduct. Graduate student involvement extends to university wide initiatives; students were active in the 2020 revisions to the Climate Action Commitment and were instrumental in the food security study that led to the creation of the Market of Virginia Tech. At the department level, graduate student associations (GSAs) plan community building events, support professional development, and participate in community outreach. My predecessors, Emily and William, started the biannual Graduate Resource Fair to help graduate students locate resources across campus. I am excited to continue this tradition with more than 25 organizations attending this Fall’s Resource Fair on September 11th. It is impossible to quantify the number of hours that graduate and professional students contribute to making Virginia Tech a better place for all, but I’m certain that the spirited, tight-knit community that led me to choose VT is sustained by the work of graduate students.

No one gets through post-secondary education alone. For many graduate and professional students, partners and family are a key element of their support system. Hokie families are also benefit to the Virginia Tech community. It is estimated that about 30% of graduate students bring

partners and about 15% bring children² with them to Blacksburg, Roanoke, or Northern Virginia, and these areas get to benefit from the excellence of the whole family. This may take the form of skilled labor, economic engagement, or simply more Hokie fans at athletic events. My husband, Connor, works as an engineer for a manufacturing startup in Christiansburg. His job made it possible for us to concurrently pursue our career goals and support a small business in the NRV. The families of graduate students add value to Virginia Tech and the commonwealth. However, for families to be able to thrive here, they need access to necessities like housing and daycare, which can be difficult to find and afford in Blacksburg.

You may have noticed that I have not mentioned many important contributions from graduate students, such as knowledge creation, research publications, representing Virginia Tech at conferences, and exemplifying *Ut Prosim* as VT alumni. These are certainly notable ways that graduate and professional students add value, but my hope was to highlight some unexpected ways that we may be making a difference. This is, in fact, my goal for my term as a BOV representative: to elevate the successes and challenges of graduate and professional students that may be flying under the radar.

This objective extends beyond my quarterly constituent reports to the Board. Groups of graduate students are often unaware of issues affecting other graduate students or other constituent groups at the university. Furthermore, most students I talk to do not know what the Board of Visitors is or how the decisions made here affect their VT experience. I hope to improve the experience of graduate and professional students by helping them understand a little more about university governance and the people that move this institution forward. To accomplish this goal, I need your help. Over the next year, I want to learn what you think graduate students should know about this board, about the agenda items discussed, and about you. I am particularly interested in exploring experiential learning experiences, graduate student resilience and mental health, and community building across programs and disciplines. With your feedback, I will strive to create avenues of advocacy for graduate and professional students that will continue long after this year.

Thank you and go Hokies!

² Source: Monika Gibson, Chief of Staff for the Graduate School