

November Constituent Report

Paolo Fermin, Undergraduate Representative to the Board of Visitors

At our last meeting, I shared students' broad sense of optimism about the return to in-person campus life. Now, in November, I'm disheartened to share that campus safety is a major source of anxiety for many students.

The biggest safety concern in the past few months is sexual violence, a term which I will use to refer to sexual harassment and sexual assault. This issue comes up consistently when speaking with student leaders. As early as September, hundreds of students protested on the steps of Burruss Hall, calling for greater accountability and support for survivors. Many student leaders in our inaugural Undergraduate Student Senate, including our President, ran on the platform of addressing these issues. Clery alerts about incidents at university-sponsored events such as football games and concerts make students wary of participating in these traditions. In my conversations with Resident Advisors, I've learned that their students are afraid to go out at night, even to take the trash right outside their buildings.

The issue of sexual violence disproportionately affects underrepresented groups on campus. The 2020 Title IX Campus Climate Survey notes that women of color reported this to be a problem more than any other group. And leaders in the LGBTQ+ community say that sexual harassment has become "a plague" for their constituents over the past year. Women are told to avoid certain construction sites because the workers make uncomfortable advances towards them. Clearly, sexual violence has been on many student's minds.

Consider another safety issue - football games. Students see an immediate and strong response to safety concerns at the football games, in contrast to little communication regarding the response to sexual violence. Everyone is excited for the return to a packed Lane stadium, but the games this year have had many safety issues, including physical injuries, overcrowded entrances, and delayed EMT arrival. In response, the university sends emails soon after the game detailing comprehensive and actionable steps taken to address the safety issues in Lane. The communication regarding sexual violence is sparse, and students think that that nothing is being done about the issue.

That's far from the case. The university has taken real steps towards addressing sexual violence on campus. This includes more the doubling the size of the Title IX office, focusing on

diversity in new hires to the Women's Center, and starting a new working group to address sexual violence culture and climate. The creation of Policy 1026 to distinguish sexual harassment as distinct from discrimination is also a great stride. I don't mean to suggest that the university isn't doing anything, but the scale of the problem far outpaces the response so far. Thus, students struggle to see the positive outcomes they want, and receiving a new Clery Act email every week amplifies anxiety about this problem.

This is a complex issue, and it requires a complex response. To reduce student's anxieties, the university needs to make a greater effort to increase transparency and promote the work that is already being done. For example, including more student voices in working groups formed to address these issues. Or perhaps letting students know that an increase in Clery emails might reflect an increase in victims' confidence to report, and that is a good thing. Along with transparency, the capacity to solve this problem cannot be left up to a few committees or offices that are limited in their ability to reach a wide audience. Instead, there needs to be a coordinated effort from all aspects of the university, from the students, administration, campus police, and more. Title IX coordinator Katie Polidoro says that in an ideal world, there would be a whole new program or office focused upon *preventative* work, a centralized location that integrates all aspects of the university and has enough influence to affect real change. The students have an important role to play too, as these situations mainly involve students harming other students. We need communication and support from a unified location on how to participate in preventative efforts. Because offices like Title IX, the Women's Center, Cook Counseling, and others, exist for response rather than prevention.

As the Board of Visitors, you are the group who can elicit a broad, university-wide response to this. I urge the Board to consider the creation of a centralized office for preventative measures, commit to making actionable strategy to address this issue, and raise up the great work that is already being done. We need guidance and resources from the Board to create the cultural shift that is necessary to really tackle this.

This issue is part of a growing national conversation about sexual violence, especially within the current social climate. In the spirit of *Ut Prosim*, Virginia Tech can lead the way and be a model for peer institutions in our response. For us to truly say that "This is Home", we need to first prove to students that "This is Safe."

**Phil Miskovic, Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors
Remarks to the Board
November 2021**

Good morning Rector Long, Vice Rector Baine, members of the Board, President Sands, administrators, guests, and fellow Hokies—

I want to begin by thanking Rector Long for meeting with a small group graduate students over lunch a few weeks ago. They were all appreciative of the opportunity to discuss their issues and concerns with you. I would also like to extend an invitation to each member of the Board: if you would like to meet with groups of graduate students, in-person or virtually, on a specific issue or to listen to general concerns, please let me know. I'm more than happy to coordinate logistics for you.

You are all aware of the perpetual concerns graduate students face, from housing to compensation and more. Given the brief time I have allotted today, I want to focus on what I believe is a more complex issue, one that exacerbates all other concerns and, conversely if resolved, will help mitigate perpetual concerns. That issue is that graduate students have no sense of community.

What do I mean by community?

Broadly speaking, I mean an informal structure that takes our rich, diverse component parts and unifies and binds them under a common identity. The benefit to community is most apparent following disasters and crises.

For example, we can think back to the days, weeks, and months following the 2007 tragedy on our campus. While institutional mechanisms played a role in community recovery and resilience, much of what brought us from that dark period were the informal structures—the history, tradition, rituals, and beliefs that create a common Hokie Spirit. Despite the differences among us, there was a common thread that connected and supported all Hokies everywhere.

I begin with an extreme example, but the benefit of community can also be seen in individual crises. Mutual support networks serve as a safety net students can rely on, supplementing emergency resources and institutional mechanisms of support provided by the University. For example, graduate students can turn to both the broader community and Cook Counseling for emotional support when needed, rather than just the latter.

So why don't graduate students have a broader community?

One explanation I've heard is that it's just the nature of graduate education—whereas undergraduates have a more formal connection to the wider university, graduate students primarily live within their own department. Everything is self-contained within that department from day one until they earn their degree.

A second, related explanation is that the nature of academia perpetuates the silos departments build up and live within. In many instances, grant funding comes directly to faculty. When discussing university budget funds, departments compete with each other for their slice of the pie. Finally, faculty and their graduate assistants are laser-focus on their individual research, leaving little capacity for innovative interdisciplinary collaboration.

So how can we begin to address this issue and create a strong graduate community?

I would propose two broad solutions:

First, we need to shine our “beyond boundaries” spotlight internally. We need to continue to not only highlight and reward groups working across departments to bridge gaps, but we also need to expose institutional barriers to interdisciplinary collaboration. We need to break down the traditional silos of academia and make Virginia Tech a network of interrelated research and activity.

Second, we need to consider the presentations we hear and the decisions we make with a graduate student lens. For example, if we build a new student housing village, setting aside a large portion for graduate students to live and commune together would certainly help build community. The Innovation Campus will continue the long history of quality graduate education we have in northern Virginia, but student housing and community space would unite graduate Hokies in the region.

I believe creating a graduate community will strengthen our social capital across the university and increase our internal capacity. In turn, this will help mitigate all other perpetual concerns we as graduate students face.

Thank you.

Staff Senate Constituency Report
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
November 7- 8, 2021 Presented by Serena Young, Staff Senate President

Rector Long, members of the Board of Visitors, President Sands, administrators, and guests: Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you about Virginia Tech's staff.

I can't believe it's already time for us to be meeting again. The last couple of months have flown by at times.

This Fall has been a busy one for staff. Our staff have been putting in a considerable amount of time working on updating our constitution and by-laws and we are excited to see all of the new changes from the improved shared governance structure. We've had presentations on the Future of Work Program and the new Performance Management System, Hokie Wellness, along with several others. Our Elections and Nominations Committee are trying to fill committee vacancies to be in alignment with our current by-laws.

This year we are having difficulty filling the majority of our committee vacancies as well as having low attendance at our monthly senate meetings. Staff believe in part this is due to staff being stretched so thin and the lack of support given by supervisors for their roles in shared governance.

At the onset of the pandemic and over the last eighteen or so months the majority of staff had a great attitude. It was one of strength, positivity, flexibility, and resilience. Staff wanted to be of service and participate in many different ways given our Ut Prosim motto. The fact is, for a lot of staff that attitude has been slowly declining since the start of this Fall semester. I'm not saying all staff feel this way but a substantial amount of them do. Staff like faculty are exhausted and overwhelmed! Many staff are stretched thin because they have had to take on multiple job duties due to understaffing. Some have had to seek additional employment outside of Tech just to make ends meet. Promises and hopes to fill empty vacancies, create new positions, or find qualified candidates to alleviate the stress and strain have fallen extremely short, not to mention staff are sensing ample opportunity for more flexible work options, better pay, and compensation elsewhere.

It's more than that though, inequities with flexible work options are still prevalent throughout campus. Virginia Tech may have returned to its new normal this fall but, that doesn't negate the fact that its staff and faculty are still dealing with uneven access to child and elder care, health concerns for the immunocompromised, mental health issues brought forth by or exacerbated by the pandemic, and our staff with disabilities trying to navigate the new normal as well. As if this weren't enough stress and strain for staff and faculty to process and work through, the addition of the vaccine mandate Virginia Tech put in place was the final straw for some. Some have chosen to leave, some chose to be vaccinated, and some submitted either a medical or religious exemption.

Staff are very thankful and appreciate that a medical or religious exemption option were offered but, that hasn't stopped the stress of the process or the passive aggressive bullying that is still taking place. Some even felt pressured/bullied into being vaccinated to retain their job and their livelihoods and that's not okay. We are often unaware of the reasons people choose to be vaccinated or not and it really shouldn't matter because at the end of the day, we are all human beings that deserve respect whether vaccinated or not. This should not be something that divides us, but it has and is. We cannot consider ourselves a great Hokie Nation/Community when there is such division. We are an institution of Higher Education and we can do better. We understand that these challenges are not specific to Virginia Tech but we also know that the Tech community is a special one, one like no other and that's something to take pride in. Bullying and incivility of any kind should not be tolerated. This is a complex topic of discussion with no easy answers unfortunately, but the one answer that is easy, can be spelled with RESPECT.

We all need change to come and come quickly. Individuals are drowning and they are growing increasingly weary. If intervention isn't made quickly, Virginia Tech may end up losing more of its valuable employees. We cannot afford to lose more staff, when our current staff are already stretched to the max.

I wasn't going to approach this topic for many reasons, but it is an issue that has greatly affected our staff and faculty and so it needed to be addressed. Most of the challenges I've mentioned today affect all of us in some way, whether we are aware or not. The effects are just felt in different ways depending on your area/position whether it be one of an administration, staff, faculty, or a student. This does not have to be something that continues to divide us. This is just another opportunity for us to come together stronger and show everyone what it means to be a part of this Hokie Nation.

I really try to be uplifting/positive and bring good things before you but this heavy burden is not one that I can carry alone, nor can I not bring it to your attention. On behalf of Staff Senate, I would like to thank you for listening today and thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts. I look forward to sharing our ongoing progress and collaborating with you all to make this year the best one yet!

Sincerely,
Serena D. Young

Faculty Senate Constituency Report

Board of Visitors Meeting, 7-8 November 2021

Shared Governance Progress

As you are aware, we are in the process of creating a shared governance model that will increase the extent to which Virginia Tech employees and students collectively engage in policymaking, including the creation of major initiatives that impact the academic landscape of Virginia Tech. The President's Committee on Governance is putting the finishing touches on many aspects of the new shared governance model, which in the spring will move through our current governance system for review by the University Council, the President, and most importantly, you, the Board of Visitors. As you may know, the President's Committee on Governance reflects the new governance model in that all the constituency groups have a say in what this committee decides. Discussions within this committee are often difficult. The fact that we reach consensus around workable solutions indicates that we are more than friends, we are family who share the desire to make Virginia Tech a better place for all of us.

Academic Freedom and Targeted Harassment

Over the past few months, we have seen targeted harassment of faculty and students by groups outside and within Virginia Tech. There is no context in which this is acceptable, and the faculty of Virginia Tech stand with those who have been targeted and will work to prevent harassment in the future. While harassment obviously hurts those who are targeted, it also has a profound impact on academic freedom generally, since the pain its victims endure can intimidate others who fear similar retribution for their scholarly views or simply because of their identity, and we need to begin an honest conversation about how to keep free speech from being weaponized. Our unity is our defense, for the intent of harassment is to force people into silence and isolation. That unity begins here, with the Board of Visitors and the example you set for our community.

Modesty and Community

The "know it all professor" is easy to spoof for good reason, as our extensive though often limited expertise can make it easy for us to lose sight of how quickly we, like most everyone else, can be out of our depth. When you are considered an "expert," the importance of intellectual modesty can easily be forgotten.

I think of modesty often in the context of my first two topics. Just the phrase "shared governance" speaks to the collective nature of what we do here and the importance of remembering that no single group can make Virginia Tech run. Harassment, on the other hand, requires a breakdown in the normal psychological circuits that stop someone from believing that their views are not only correct but warrant forceful imposition on others.

Attachment DD

I believe there are difficult times ahead that will try our ability to hear each other. It is only natural that the divisions in our country show up on our campus, and this is an era that rewards taking positions over engaging our differences, that has seen harassment and physical violence become more acceptable and even rewarded.

As a “know it all” professor, I readily admit that I do not know how to overcome these trends other than to reinforce and extend our bonds. Talking to each other the way we do in this room and through shared governance generally is a form of breaking bread together. You get to know something about a person beyond their job or views, and that connection makes it more likely that you will see and respond to their humanity.

Most faculty, though, will never meet anyone on the Board of Visitors. There are twenty-six hundred of us and of course far fewer of you. I see tremendous value, though, in closing that distance between the board and faculty, and invite every member of the Board of Visitors to first speak to me and Robin Queen, the vice president of the Faculty Senate, then the Faculty Senate Cabinet, and finally to the Faculty Senate as a whole.

It may seem like a small thing, but taking extra steps right now to make sure that we are talking with and listening to each other will help us get through a demanding time.