Outline:
- Corona
  - Proud
  - How the semester felt/is feeling
  - Switch to cold
  - Quality of academics
  - Hopes for spring
- d&i → international
  - Freshmen experience now
  - Making people feel welcome
  - Highlights a dominant culture on campus
  - The little things (oasis, etc.)
- Administrative support
  - Social media statistics
  - We are in a tough position
  - Covid: connecting to students
  -

       I want to start by saying that it's wonderful to see you all in person, and I am so proud of and thrilled about how Virginia Tech and the local New River Valley community have handled the past several months. Though we did have a spike in cases at the beginning of that semester, the numbers have steadily gone down since then as students have learned how to navigate new forms of social and academic activity. At the last meeting, I spoke about needing to set students up for success, and you did just that. This has really been a collective effort and we wouldn't be at this point without the support from administrators who have approved in-person events, faculty who have had compassion for our situations, and staff who basically make everything happen at this school. Thank you to all of those groups for your empathy and resources, and of course a thank you also goes out to my fellow students, who have adapted all of ours norms, held each other accountable, and used creativity to make the best of a tough situation.

       For many of us, this has been the hardest semester of our lives. What I hear from students across the board is that mental health and academic performance have taken a dive. Students who have never missed a deadline aren't starting assignments until the night they are due; students who had a morning routine at McComas are finding it hard to get out of bed and go for a walk. On top of this, many virtual classes allow students to have video and audio off, leaving us feeling distanced from one of the only stable parts of our day. From the student perspective, it feels like our experience and opportunities are being chipped away at -- it is harder to make connections with professors and classmates, harder to stand out at a career fair, harder to get involved with clubs and try new things. I have received a barrage of emails from students asking when we'll receive the Credit/No Credit grading options, more flexibility with time off, or options for tuition reimbursement. I don't know what to tell them. Students understand that this

year will never be "normal" and that accommodations have to be made to keep our community safe, but there is a common thought among students that the administration keeps "taking" without understanding the impact on our lives.

Looking forward to the spring semester, I hope to see the university continue the positives that I mentioned above, but work to address the issues that left students struggling this semester. It is undebatable that the academic rigor has taken a dive, and many classes feel duller than ever while the work continues to pile up. All this without the same day-to-day human interactions that keep us sane and regular semester breaks that allow us to recharge with loved ones. I believe that we all have to work not just to replicate a typical semester in the virtual environment, but truly push ourselves to use these new resources to create an engaging learning experience and community space.

I would be remiss without pointing out that the pandemic and its effect on the student body has not been felt equally. It is hard enough to be a freshman at a large university without being in a global pandemic, but being an international student makes that experience exponentially harder. International freshmen have to overcome navigating the immigration and travel systems to get to the US, language barriers, a new culture, and making friends at a school where the majority of students are from the local area. Even the small details can feel isolating, such as not being able to get the food your family cooks at a dining hall or from a local restaurant. Many students who start at Tech already know who their friends are, what clubs they want to join, and how school traditions work. For those who don't have that prior knowledge, it can be easy to feel like an outsider. Now more than ever, Virginia Tech feels overwhelmingly homogenous in a way that serves as a constant reminder to students that they are in the minority.

For our international undergraduates who chose to remain abroad, they are being asked to continue attending classes, participating in meetings, and holding leadership positions on east coast time, which forces many of them to wake up throughout the night in order to continue their academic and career trajectory. While time difference issues are certainly not the fault of the university or any professor, I want to take this moment to really appreciate all that our international Hokies do everyday that can go unnoticed.

Though I am so excited by the progress Sabrina, myself, and other students have made so far, I remain frustrated with the lack of administrative support that I feel. Student leaders at this university have been working tirelessly to represent their constituents and push for policy with little to no results. I have heard this sentiment echoed across the university that we feel like the student opinion is only considered when it is convenient. Sometimes I'll see an update from VT News with an announcement of something that I've been asking for, and am left wondering if my ideas were used and never credited. Other times, I'll be asked for my opinion only to see the exact opposite decision be made with no explanation. Even worse is when the student body is handed decisions that impact our everyday lives knowing full well that no student voices had any say in the matter. I and every other student leader at this school are simply trying to be heard in

a way that is more than superficial. Virginia Tech is overflowing with dedicated administrators who excel at their jobs, and I would like to see much more direct support for student representatives and campus organizations who are working for the betterment of the whole university.

My dream is for the systems of student governance to be explained at orientation, so that all students attending Tech can understand who is standing up for them and how they can take advantage of or get involved with that process. Further, I would be thrilled to have more official university personnel or news channels and social media accounts help elevate the profiles and projects of student leaders. The pandemic has made making these connections infinitely more difficult, but it layers on an existing problem -- as representatives, we are being asked to leverage social media to reach the entire student body, connect with everyone from the newest Hokie freshmen up to the highest decision-makers at the university, identify issues and come up with creative yet impactful solutions that haven't been thought of yet, bring concepts from academic policy to keep on track with peer institutions, and finally, we have to execute all of our ideas on our own. There are so many people at the university that are more skilled in these areas than I am. I don't want to stand up here and speak on the same problems that you've been hearing about from representatives for years. That's why I'm asking for increased direct engagement with the issues and ideas that student leaders bring to the table, so that we can make tangible progress where it is needed

At the last meeting, I spoke on the concept of mass flourishing. Our whole community has demonstrated this in action through our commitment to the health and well-being of each other. However, this concept extends to shared governance and policy as well. The more people we involve with ideating and working for change, the richer the end result will be, and this applies for every constituent group. It's what makes us Hokies -- we do better together.

Good afternoon, everyone. This report is the culmination of ideas from faculty, staff, students, and colleagues, who without their support would not have made this possible.

Graduate Assistants in Programmatic, Teaching, and Research Roles

I am deeply concerned about graduate students being able to maintain work-life balance. Frequently, in addition to our academic obligations, graduate assistants have limited autonomy in our roles and cannot exercise choice in determining our work schedule or demands on our time. For example, in September the Division of Student Affairs directed that offices on campus host programming over Labor Day weekend to occupy the undergraduate body. This announcement was made *days* before Labor Day and effectively rendered graduate student's university sanctioned break void. For the Spring semester: Student Affairs has initiated a call to action that programmatic offices host 50% of their programs as in-person experiences. This 50% mandate forces graduate students to be present at in-person experiences, which places them at greater risk while the pandemic is in effect. One might argue that graduate assistants have a choice to work these roles and that if we are not comfortable with those expectations, that we can work elsewhere. I counter with that being an illusion of choice. The stakes are too high that make the choice of simply resigning unreasonable. Our educational funding is often tied to these positions. This illusion of choice extends to other student employees. like Resident Assistants who have their housing security dangling in the balance of being told, "they have a choice in working there or not"

The university's plan for spring semester includes a push to return to in-person instruction and five intermittently spaced one-day breaks rather than a full week off for spring break. Students who have lab work and teaching expectations will likely have to exercise these days to contribute to scholarship, research, and instruction preparation to adequately meet administrative, college, and federal deadlines. With the multitude of competing demands that graduate students must commit to, I compare these one-day breaks to a gasp for air whilst being pulled along a sweeping current – they provide momentary relief, but the overall threat remains. We must ensure that these breaks can be used by graduate students and that all of our competing demands and priorities do not undermine their purpose. What can we do to make sure graduate students are supported, treated fairly, and don't feel as though they are being exploited?

Diminished Quality of Education

My quality of education has declined; many students have shared with me a somber disappointment in the education they have received this semester. Students are expressing that they are not learning as much, stressed, and disengaged by the virtual classroom. One might respond that, "this was to be expected" or that "we are living in a pandemic, of course it's not going to be the same quality!". While these statements provide justification, they simultaneously dismiss accountability. I am grateful that the cost of tuition did not rise this academic year, but the record should note that the equivalent cost is for a faltering online education vs the experiential learning that we hoped for. I think that something should be done to either improve

the quality of online education or create more achievable metrics under a lower quality of education – simply put, inclusive pedagogy. At least until in-person education resumes in full.

I understand optional intensive training and preparation was provided to faculty and teaching assistants prior to the start of the semester. Perhaps we need more of this? We could allow students the opportunity to choose to be evaluated on the credit/no-credit grade modality like last Spring as opposed to the A-F model? We could extend course completion deadlines to ease the stress of student's negatively impacted by the lower quality of learning? Maybe a slight reduction or rebate in tuition rates for students in online only experiences? Now, I recognize each of these proposals comes with a "We can't do that because…". I urge you to **not** mire in the barriers, but to instead seek solutions. We can all agree; Virginia Tech was not meant to be experienced online. But if we have to experience it online, how can we improve the experiences of students and faculty?

Virginia Tech Communication

Communication continues to be a challenge. In reviewing previous student representative reports, it appears that this concern has been raised several times over the past two years. We have talked about how communication is too polished, poorly disseminated, and lacks centralization. In June 2018 undergraduate BoV Representative , Seyi Olusina highlighted that communication with students needs improvements. In June 2019, Rachel Iwicki spoke to the lack of transparency regarding communications. Madelynn Todd spoke to this issue at the August and November meetings last year and discussed a Student Leader Communications Workshop to begin to address the issues – that never happened. Camellia and I brought up communications three months ago. Camellia has worked tirelessly toward a collaborative relationship in leveraging Instagram to disseminate information on behalf of the University. This appears to be effective, indicating that communication team and student partnerships might be worth exploring, but I caution students bearing the load of university information dissemination. In my previous report, I proposed that an assessment project be performed to collect real data on where the communication problems lie. I submitted a survey proposal for this and met with our communications team – ultimately the project was abandoned. That is 6 times that a student representative has raised awareness to this issue.

To contextualize this issue, I will provide an example and can provide others upon request. The parking fiasco that happened this semester was defended by expressing to the campus community that it was part of the 5-year parking plan. This 5-year plan gave plenty of time to disseminate and prime students of the upcoming change, but instead was reported abruptly and two weeks later than the 5-year plan designated, no less. When students called the parking office, they were even given different information from what the website suggested when trying to buy a permit. Finally, even though this is on the 5-year plan, I as an involved student leader cannot find this plan on the website. This example highlights untimeliness, poor centralization of communication, and poor dissemination.

It appears we are operating on an "advancement model" of communication, which might be appropriate to external constituencies of the university who need to get a high-level overview

of what is going on at the university and one that frames us in an attractive light. Perhaps more attention could be paid to a model that shares necessary information with students, faculty, and staff? We, as members of Virginia Tech community, expect complex ideas and policies disseminated in digestible ways – the rationale behind decisions. We want to understand what is happening at our home – triumphs and defeats. We want information that does not appear sanitized. I am indifferent to whether these problems are addressed through a workshop, press briefings, partnerships, a consultation, or assessment – I simply want to see the problem addressed in a successful way so that the next student representatives do not need to raise the issue. This issue has come to a boiling point, what will be done to remedy this?

Conclusion

I want to conclude by asking, how will you, as Board of Visitor members execute your authority to remedy student representative concerns voiced today and in the future? My over-arching request is that the experiences and needs of graduate and professional students be attended to more intentionally by faculty and administrators. I come to you hopeful that we can pursue changes to how we are operating based on the observations of the student body. Thank you for this time.

Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
November 15-16, 2020
Presented by Tamarah Smith, Staff Senate President

Good afternoon Rector Valeiras, Board of Visitors members, President Sands, Provost Clarke, Administrators and distinguished guests.

I am grateful to be here today to present on behalf of our staff. First, I want to thank Tracy Vosburgh and her team for the transparency in the communications that we are receiving. One of the hardest things for any of us, is to not have the information that we need to succeed. The communications coming from the university (all areas of impact) has been helpful and informative. In addition, the staff would like to extend a thank you to Bryan Garey and his team for delivering information about how spring semester will be managed.

I would like to speak briefly about diversity. We have a large diverse campus, yet there remains much fear felt by faculty, staff, and students. There are fears of hate crimes, sexual harassment and abuse, bullying, and fear of saying the wrong thing that can and will offend someone. A good start to addressing some fears is our mandatory diversity training, but we need more. When I participated in the Diversity Ally, Advocate, and Ambassador training years ago, I learned a lot about others and myself. The training presented us with the opportunity to be in class with other faculty and staff and engage in conversations that are critical to our growth. These types of programs need to be brought back to the forefront.

In terms of professional development, there are some staff that are doing well during this pandemic, the majority, however, are not (please read, The Staff Are Not OK, by Lee Skallerup Bessette, October 30, 2020, Chronicle of Higher Education). Our staff are the frontline that have had to help students, answer the calls from upset parents, be a sounding board for struggling faculty, learn yet another software program, become good enough at new programs to teach others, keep up with our jobs, while also managing our children's school schedules that are in constant flux, arrange child and elder/dependent care, serve as the first point of contact for faculty as they struggled to get their classes online and a huge amount of the success of that goes to the staff that are there willing, able, and without credit to do the job that needs to be done. More meetings are set up back-to-back, advising is at an all-time high, inboxes are flooded with emails which makes staff in those positions working harder than ever.

And let's talk about our staff in wage positions. My colleagues in wage positions worry about a layoff due to COVID19. The university is sending students home in November to not return until spring. With many wage employees being on single incomes, working either on or off campus, trying to find affordable/quality childcare and or elder/dependent care, all of these pressures have mentally drained staff. The commitment to everyone that is working through a pandemic should be commended. I am happy to hear the work that departments are doing to ensure as many staff

as possible are placed into other positions to ensure they continue to get a pay check while the students are away. Staff are grateful. Our Essential employees have willingly been here through this entire pandemic. I would love to see more acknowledgement and praise be given from the administration and the entire university for the work of our essential employees who have been put at risk as they clean our facilities, repaint and clean dorms, cook and serve the food, and provided other numerous services to this university in ways that I can't even fathom.

Staff do not have the same autonomy as faculty have, so when emphasis is constantly put on faculty and students, let's not forget the staff and all that they bring to the table. Staff should be recognized, rewarded, and encouraged to continue to do the great work that they are doing. We have staff from all walks of life and each bring a different flavor to our work places. They are essential to Virginia Tech and are a part of what makes Virginia Tech so great.

I am a resource for this university advocating for staff, working beside our faculty, undergraduate and graduate student constituent leaders. I welcome encouragement and input on how we can work together to make our university stronger and work towards meeting the goals of our strategic plan.

More than Employees: Faculty as Suppliers
Presented by Eric Kaufman, Faculty Representative to Virginia Tech's Board of Visitors

I want to start by thanking several board members. Earlier this fall, Rector Valeiras joined a Faculty Senate meeting and answered several questions faculty members had at the time. The candid communication really helps faculty feel better understood and supported. I also want to highlight the generous financial support Mehul Sanghani provided for "The Market," to address food insecurity. The pandemic has exposed many disparities, and programs like The Market are truly supporting Virginia Tech students in need.

During my address in August, I highlighted the importance of Virginia Tech's engagement mission, and I appreciate those who followed-up with related questions. I look forward to future conversations about our land-grant roots. Today, though, my goal is to highlight more generally the relationship between a university and its faculty.

To best understand the relationship, I encourage you to think about a supermarket. Near where I was raised, there is a small chain called Buehler's. Like your typical grocery store, they stock products from a wide variety of suppliers, some local and some national brands. In the mid-2000s, Nabisco noticed declining sales among its products, and it selected Buehler's to pilot a redesign of the cookie and cracker aisle. The design was dubbed "Mom's Kitchen," because it placed Nabisco's products in a self-contained area, built out to reflect a nostalgic vision of a home kitchen and pantry. The finishing touch was fridge cases filled with milk, backlit and glowing. (Who doesn't want milk with Oreos?) From a sales perspective, the stores saw double-digit increases in sales of cookie and cracker products. (Sales of Nabisco products increased by as much as 32 percent.) Not only that, they started selling out of milk; they simply couldn't keep it on the shelves. Despite the

"Mom's Kitchen" installation at a Buehler's in Ashland, Ohio. Photo from Shook Kelley archives.

tremendous success, though, the experiment stalled. Buehler's employees found it inconvenient to stock milk in two places, and the corporate division of Nabisco's parent company never capitalized on the success. Instead, the architect of "Mom's Kitchen," took the general vision to another midwestern supermarket (Harvest Market) and used it to advance the sales of a wide variety of local goods (see Fassler, 2019).

So, what does this have to do with universities and faculty? Well, faculty are more like grocery store suppliers than employees. What the university sells is produced by faculty. Not only that, but faculty often have good ideas for how to better connect with the interests and needs of those

who support the university.   When faculty are supported, they continue to contribute in ways that allow the entire university to benefit. However, if they feel stifled or unappreciated, they will become disengaged or take their talents elsewhere.

As I consider the struggles through the pandemic, I am thoroughly impressed by faculty investments in University success (see news articles related to COVID-19). While the admissions folks have done a remarkable job with enrollment, instructional faculty deserve a share of recognition for success with student retention. As Dr. Kevin Hamed noted, "we are trying to show the students that this is a great opportunity to learn how to be adaptive and creative." In reflecting on a first-year experience course, Dr. Herbert Bruce added: "Doing it this way has been a lot more difficult, but I honestly believe it's what the students need to get as much normalcy out of the semester as possible." Faculty are working hard to deliver the best format for the circumstances (as highlighted in the recent article about Dr. Kristopher Hite's different approaches for different classes).

On the research front, Virginia Tech's sponsored awards have increased by 15 percent, and that is aside from the nearly 100 COVID-19 rapid response proposals submitted for seed funding. Faculty are leading a wide variety of research projects related to the pandemic, including numerous interdisciplinary projects funded by the National Science Foundation. In a recent article on "Crisis Response," College of Science Dean Sally Morton noted: "Scientists solve problems, and COVID-19 represents one of the most extensive challenges to our nation ever."

However, not all faculty have been thriving in this environment; many faculty are burning out. The 2020 COACHE Survey of Faculty Job Satisfaction reveals one of the most significant challenges of working at Virginia Tech is the "unrelenting pressure to perform." The challenge is even more daunting for the 30% of faculty who rely upon dependent care in order to fulfill their duties at Virginia Tech, because the options for dependent care have been seriously constrained during the pandemic (and support from the Women's Center is too limited).

So, what can the Board of Visitors do with these insights? When the Board approves compensation plans and employment policies, please remember the investments faculty are making for the betterment of the University. Also, please ensure Virginia Tech administrators are listening to faculty concerns and engaging faculty representatives in decision-making processes. I encourage you to promote increased transparency and improved communication wherever possible. (We need to avoid the 'toxic positivity' publicly reported on at other institutions.) Plans are underway for a new shared governance model at Virginia Tech, and your support of that model depends upon an appreciation for the contributions faculty make that go far beyond the notion of employee obligations. My hope is the supermarket analogy helps you to envision the symbiotic relationship between faculty and administrators. I would be glad to answer any questions that you have.