

President's Open Session Remarks

BOV June 2, 2020

We had an online emergency meeting of the Board of Visitors on COVID-19 in March, the Executive Committee met online in May, and we have had a series of online committee meetings through May and yesterday, but it has been since November that the full board has met to take on regular business.

Those six months have been eventful, to say the least - not just for Virginia Tech, but for the entire country. The combination of passing the tragic milestone of 100,000 deaths attributed to COVID-19 and the killing of George Floyd have put the country on edge – some might say – over the edge. And while we must deal with the moment, the larger lesson that has been exposed by a combination of racist acts of violence and the disparities across race, ethnicity, income and age in the impact of COVID-19 - that our country suffers from deep historical rifts that are holding us back from becoming the more ideal society that most of us are impatient to realize.

It is times like these that we in higher education – and that is especially true for the boards that steward our institutions – recognize what a privilege it is to have the ability to create an environment where the leaders of the future can develop the skills they need to move our country and the world forward to a better and more equitable future.

Thank you for approving the proposal to hold tuition rates constant. For in-state undergraduates, this will be the second year that we have maintained tuition rates. I think this is the only decision that makes sense given the uncertainties we all face headed into the fall. Students and their families need to be able to plan around something that is not moving.

It may be that our restraint on tuition rates exacerbates the university's short-term budget challenges, but in the longer term, I am confident that this will make us stronger. As you heard from our provost, the incoming class is poised to set records in many dimensions of diversity, expanding the pool from which Virginia Tech will recruit in the future. And they are exceptionally talented and driven individuals, reflecting the grit and hope that have always characterized Hokies.

We will announce our plans for bringing back our students, faculty and staff on June 8th. We are gathering input and advice from a wide range of stakeholders, from our constituent faculty, staff and student groups, to the communities that host our campuses. We are also awaiting guidance from the Virginia Secretary of Education.

I'd like to share with you some of the principles we are using to develop the plan for fall:

- We affirm that our highest priority is the safety, health, and wellbeing of our community.
- We value our deep relationships with the communities that host our campuses, facilities, and programs.
- We remain committed to our tripartite teaching, research, and outreach mission, and its transformational impacts on the intellectual development of students and the economic vitality of the communities that we serve.
- We are committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion and reaffirm the Principles of Community as foundational to our work.
- We will be guided by the values and aspirations expressed in our strategic plan, “The Virginia Tech Difference – Advancing Beyond Boundaries.”
- We acknowledge the value of the Virginia Tech student experience.
- We will continue to rely on internal and external input from a wide array of stakeholders to guide our holistic, principles-based approach to the fall semester.
- We will be flexible and prepared with resiliency and the sense of service that permeates the Hokie Nation.
- We are committed to proper public health practices as we transition to an on-campus learning and research environment.
- We will make informed, data-driven decisions and operate within our resource capacity.

As you heard from our provost yesterday, these principles are leading us toward a Blacksburg campus plan with some of the following key features:

- An academic calendar that does not require most students and faculty to return to campus after Thanksgiving Break.
- A risk-based testing strategy as we onboard faculty, staff and students in the fall.
- A testing, tracing and isolation regime rooted in a case management approach, in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Health and following C.D.C. guidelines, that will be designed to contain outbreaks and minimize exposure to the most vulnerable in our population.
- A prevalence testing strategy that will help to inform decisions to relax or tighten practices that minimize the spread of COVID-19 on campus and in the community.
- A student experience that will preserve the most important elements of in-person learning, but will make optimal use of remote and on-line teaching and learning to limit the spread of the disease; we estimate that roughly 30% of the typical student’s experience will be in-person at the beginning of the semester, with the ability to increase that percentage should health safety considerations allow.
- Public health guidelines that will include face coverings in public indoor spaces and outside when distancing is not possible.
- Flexible accommodations for employees and for faculty and graduate students whose typical in-person teaching, research and outreach assignments would put the individual or their family at unacceptable levels of risk.

- Occupancy limits in indoor spaces will follow C.D.C. guidelines and any additional guidance provided by the Commonwealth of Virginia.
- Reduced occupancy in residence halls, balancing the risks on campus with those in the community.
- Phasing in of research, clinical programs and athletics over the summer following the best available health safety practices.

We are expecting to release more definitive plans on June 8th, with the working understanding that the plans will evolve with more input and new knowledge as we approach the beginning of the academic year.

Finally, I'd like to remark on some of the fiscal challenges that we anticipate as we begin the 2020-21 fiscal year. The bottom line is that Virginia Tech had incredible momentum coming into the pandemic, and everything we do from a fiscal perspective must be aimed at being a better and different institution on the other side. The budget you just approved includes a reduction of 5% in discretionary expenditures. The reality is that we really don't know yet where we will be in September, after we learn about state appropriations and enrollment. Our priority will be to preserve, to the extent possible, the talent that makes Virginia Tech special. Although I have been delegated a time-limited ability to avoid job losses using temporary pay reductions or furloughs for faculty and university staff, we will do whatever we can to avoid utilizing this tool. If we find that we must employ this capability to avoid permanent job reductions in the fall, the first application will be temporary pay reductions to the university administrative leadership.

I remain confident that we can manage through this crisis and emerge a better institution. Our people, who worked so hard over the spring to preserve the Virginia Tech student experience and to apply their expertise to solving problems in our communities, have extraordinary capacity to pull together in a crisis. That said, no one has unlimited capacity, and our primary concern will be to support our people – faculty, staff, student, and alumni – as we face together what is shaping up to be the most challenging period in our recent history. We can do it together by watching out for each other.

I'm happy to take any questions or input you would like to share.

Thank you.