

Undergraduate Student Constituency Report

Virginia Tech Board of Visitors

Presented by Madelynn Todd, Undergraduate Student Representative

Good afternoon, Rector Valeiras, President Sands, members of the Board of Visitors, and distinguished guests. I want to thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the undergraduate students of Virginia Tech.

As we all know, this year has been challenging for everyone including Virginia Tech students, faculty, and staff. However, these events have also demonstrated that Hokie resiliency, perseverance, and unity of purpose are as strong as ever. And, unfortunately, with the events of the past week fresh in our hearts and minds, it is likely that we will continue to be tested as a community, commonwealth, and country.

The transition of 4,500 spring 2020 class sections to a remote format in response to the coronavirus pandemic was largely successful. The online transition did, however, result in issues for some students with little or no internet services or difficulties with non-traditional learning methods. Fortunately, Virginia Tech was able to support many of these students with help from TiLOS and other technology resources, as well assistance from Services for Students with Disabilities.

As mentioned in my last report, many undergraduate students had difficulties funding tuition for the spring semester and expressed concern with similar issues for the fall semester. Some students received refunds for on-campus housing, dining, and parking passes; while others

received assistance from the Student Emergency Fund, the Student Opportunity and Achievement Resources (SOAR) program, through requests for additional financial aid through the Office of University Scholarships and Financial Aid, and through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. In addition, the undergraduate student community is very pleased to learn that Finance and Resource Management Committee will recommend a tuition freeze to the full Board of Visitors for resident and nonresident undergraduate, graduate, and professional students for the 2020-2021 academic year. Although this tuition freeze may result in budgetary challenges for the upcoming year, it is clear and definitive message of support for Virginia Tech students.

Most undergraduate students are excited about the possibility of returning to campus in the fall, but still express some concerns about the safety of more vulnerable students and what can be done to support them. Yesterday Provost Clarke assured us that these students will be protected as much as possible, even providing single rooms if necessary. As a student that falls into this category, I sincerely thank the administrators for this consideration and their willingness to protect such students. Further, some students question if the current medical infrastructure in Blacksburg could support a coronavirus outbreak on campus and/or in the surrounding community. Despite these uncertainties, undergraduate students look forward to the determination on when and how Virginia Tech will reopen.

Fellow Hokies have also expressed appreciation for the timely, relevant, and encouraging statement given by President Sands and others regarding the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. More than ever, this is the time to work together to ensure that Virginia Tech becomes the standard for equal and accessible learning for all students.

As I end my term as the Undergraduate Representative to the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors, I want to first welcome my replacement, Camellia Pastore. I wish her much success as she assumes her duties, and I am committed to supporting her in any way possible during my senior year. And finally, I want to thank all of you for this amazing opportunity. It has been an absolute honor to represent the Hokie undergraduate community and to work with members of the Board. This position has provided an insight into university governance at the highest levels and afforded me the opportunity to meet so many inspirational students, staff, and faculty – many of whom I now count as friends. I have grown tremendously as a student, as a leader, and as a Hokie. I will forever be grateful for the opportunity to serve as the Undergraduate Representative to the Board of Visitors, and I remain committed to doing whatever I can to ensure the continued success of Virginia Tech.

Thank you and Go Hokies!

June 2020 Constituency Report
Written and Presented by: D. Ryan King
June 2, 2020

Rector Valeiras, Board of Visitors, President Sands, and all others watching online – thank you for this opportunity to deliver the last constituent report of my tenure as the graduate representative to the Board of Visitors.

The past several months are more reminiscent of an Orwell novel than reality. In the summer of 2019, Dr. Ralph Hall's group released report on food security which indicated one in three graduate students at Virginia Tech are food insecure. On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization officially characterized the spread of COVID-19 as a pandemic, and as I write this report over 320,000 people have died worldwide. In the United States unemployment claims continue to rise far beyond historic levels. In the past week, we have seen nationwide protests against racism that have challenged us to all think deeply about the world in which we live. While the university has been quick to condemn racism, words alone are not enough. In short, many graduate students are hungry, scared, unemployed, and deeply hurting.

This spring, the Dean of Students and VT Engage headed a working group to tackle food insecurity, I was fortunate to serve on this group. We are now finished with the preliminary stage of this work and I believe the recommendations, which are extensive, will soon be presented. Implementation of certain aspects could begin as early as this summer. One recommendation that came out of Dr. Hall's original report was to re-evaluate the graduate student stipend because financial insecurity directly lends itself to food insecurity.

Regarding assistantships – approximately 1/3 of our graduate student body has no assistantship at all. Of those remaining, only 12% hold a 12-month assistantship leaving the remaining students on assistantships with unsteady employment prospects on a summer by summer basis. In a typical year, ~60% of these students are employed by the university during the summers. This year, due to COVID-19, university jobs do not exist for our students and neither do jobs in the community. Despite having worked diligently on an assistantship during the academic year, our students are not eligible for unemployment. In summary, there are no jobs to occupy and we are not eligible for government assistance. We need to move toward more outright 12-month assistantships for our students as opposed to the current system of a 9-month assistantship with a 3-month extension depending on the health and good will of the university. For less than 0.25% of the endowment we could have extended assistantships to our students in need throughout the summer – the university chose not to take this route. So, I have to ask, what is the purpose in an endowment if we do not use it to support our students when they need it most?

Racism is by no means a new construct in our society. Origins of racism on the basis of skin color can be traced as far back as Aristotle and despite his racist theories being debunked time and time again they are persistent in our society. Over the past year, in the Order of the Gavel (a convening of top student leadership throughout campus) the topic of race has come to the surface and it is clear that while Virginia Tech strives to make advances in diversity and inclusion we are not there yet. For instance, I've heard from several of my Black colleagues in graduate STEM programs that the very noticeable lack of Black faculty in STEM disciplines at Virginia Tech makes it difficult to identify a graduate mentor with whom they can relate. I am happy to see we are on track for one of the most diverse incoming undergraduate classes ever, but the real measure of success will be seeing these students through to the finish line with a degree in hand and we need focused efforts on increasing faculty diversity to get there. As I mentioned in the introduction, the graduate community appreciates the university's denouncement of racism, but words alone are not enough and we look forward to working with the Office for Inclusion and Diversity as they release their action items in the coming weeks.

Before wrapping up, I want to comment on a constituency group I do not represent – the postdocs. At Virginia Tech, postdocs are absent from the table at any level of the administration or the board, they are not invited into conversations that directly pertain to them. Compared to the other R1's our treatment of postdocs is absolutely shameful, and leave them out every step of the way. In health science fields in particular, postdocs are an essential part of the research team

Attachment LL

and if we hope to continue growing our health science research enterprise we need more structured support for our postdocs at a university level. Dr. Friedlander does a phenomenal job of including postdocs in his decision making in Roanoke, but the university needs to also step up and show support for our postdocs.

I want to say thank you to the graduate students all across the commonwealth for giving me an opportunity to represent them on the board. I want to also thank all of the administrators I have worked with during the past year for all of the work they have done and will continue to do on behalf of graduate students. At times that required being brutally honest, but I appreciate the professionalism with which my criticisms were received.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ryan King". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ryan" and last name "King" clearly distinguishable.

Ryan King

Staff Senate Constituency Report

Virginia Tech Board of Directors

June 2, 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 honored to be here today and to be a valued member of the Virginia Tech Community. Having worked here over 31 years I have seen a lot happen at this university. When COVID19 hit our area our university immediately stepped up and made decisions for the protection of our students, faculty and staff. From expanding the students spring break in order for faculty to get classes online to allowing and in a lot of ways asking people to work from home this was huge. And for those positions that could not work remotely, the university worked with employees to ensure they were paid through the spring semester. While other companies around the US were laying employees off, we were continuing to pay our employees even though workloads were drastically reduced. That is phenomenal, and I for one am so grateful to our administrators for taking care of us in this regard. PPE's were given to essential employees and so many other things were done to ensure safety. Thank you!

There has been concern amongst staff on communication. We understand not everything can be answered due to so many pieces involved in making decisions and ensuring safety, however this does not help the anxiety level when we have heard very little about staff. Some concerns:

When will we go back to work?

What happens if public schools don't go back in fall, what am I to do with my children?

I have elderly parents I take care of, I can't be put at risk.

I don't feel safe going back to work yet.

I can't afford to take a pay cut, when are we going to hear about what the university is going to do if the economy does not pick up?

Will there be furloughs?

Communication will probably always be an issue, and I do feel like the ones that have my ear are listening. In the scope of things, staff are happy to have jobs and are grateful that our university has put safety first.

The possibility of a 20% pay cut would debilitate staff. Many of our staff are paid well below the medium. I understand the need for drastic measures to aid in our budget shortfalls, but such a large pay cut in order to preserve jobs may not necessarily be the best route for our staff positions.

A furlough would be rough on folks but would be better in the long run for faculty and staff. Especially if it was done soon so that we could reap the extra money given due to COVID19 when claiming unemployment. The last option would be a tier reduction starting with the top pay.

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.

Faculty Constituency Report
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
June 2, 2020

John Ferris, President—VT Faculty Senate

Good afternoon Rector Valeiras, President Sands, members of the Board, and all others gathered here today.

I wrote a rather light piece a few months ago that I planned to present to the Board. I spoke of the success that the Provost's Office and the Faculty Senate have had in collaborating on academic matters of shared governance and experiential learning. But I'm afraid that tone does not match today's world and today's university. I've served as Faculty Senate President for two years and I'd like to reflect on how things have changed, and stayed the same, in these two years.

In August 2018, I spoke to the Board about the faculty engine running at redline for far too long. Faculty had been hired at half the rate that undergraduate enrollment had increased since at least 2015. And that was before the over enrollment of 2019. And that was before freezing faculty hiring this year.

In 2018 we learned that the Strategic Plan calls for us to be in the top half in every category and to increase our performance in every measure by 5% every year going forward. We also heard that the 2 of the 3 lowest rated responses in the COACH survey were workload and work-life balance. I asked that, with few notable exceptions, Virginia Tech respect faculty life outside of Virginia Tech; to protect evenings and weekends from Virginia Tech obligations. I hear now that this time may be taken from us while families cope with a pandemic.

In 2018 we learned that a billion dollars became available, devoted to an expansion of our inclusive state-wide campus. We learned that the Virginia Tech endowment exceeded a billion dollars and that the non-capital assets are nearly a billion. Meanwhile faculty pay relative to peers has dropped from about the 35th to the 29th to the 25th percentile, while the goal remains the 60th. And that was before freezing faculty salaries. And that was before discussions of cutting faculty pay.

In March 2020, faculty responded admirably to the COVID-19 virus, moving, I believe, 4500 classes online in 12 days. On April 15th VT News touted the new buildings in the Innovation Campus. Many faculty have voiced to me a perception that the focus is on building buildings rather than on the people who fulfil the mission of our university, at a time when we are all dealing with the stress of the pandemic and significant financial hardships.

Yesterday I was asked if there is a risk in losing faculty, if some may simply choose not to return. The boldness and honesty of this core question floored me, given all that has happened to faculty in the last two years.

My fear is that the familial bonds holding many faculty members to Tech have been worn away, leaving many disillusioned, disenfranchised and disengaged, with only their "job" remaining. Many will do the simple math: even fewer of us, doing even more work, for even less pay; and decide they are done. I can imagine that cutting faculty pay may be the last straw for some who have the means to simply walk away, which would leave us in quite a bind. But I worry more that when the economy improves and positions outside Tech become available, there will be a large, but quiet exodus of our best faculty members.

The concerns I've raised here are substantial and the decisions you make this summer and fall will determine the character of Virginia Tech for a generation. Who we are and what we stand for. Do our deeds match our words. Yet the working relationship between the Provost's Office and the Faculty Senate gives me faith that you can answer the challenges I have laid out. I don't know what new form Tech will take in the coming years, but I choose to believe that you have a carefully considered plan to take us to some envisioned future that will be better for faculty, A/P faculty, staff, undergraduate students and graduate students.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Faculty Senate, John Ferris