

Staff Senate Constituency

March 20 & 21, 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. It's hard to believe we are now in year two of this COVID journey that immediately put the world into a whirl wind of change. I would like to share comments with you today on four topics of particular interest to staff. These topics are telecommuting, mental health, diversity, and racism.

For employees, telecommuting during the pandemic has meant continuing to try to balance work and home life. Several issues that continue to come up are homeschooling, child care, mental illness and pressure from job and financial insecurities. Staff Senate hosted Dwayne Pinkney, Kevin Faust, and Brian Garey, to address some staff concerns. Mr. Garey shared the work that has been ongoing with telecommuting and reiterated the fact that permission to telecommute is up to supervisors. Having supervisors approve telecommuting results in inconsistencies in departments across the university – which some staff experience as unfair. This fact has caused upheaval amongst staff. Staff that are already in positions where supervisory practices present morale issues among staff view this as one more issue that will not be addressed. While telecommuting has been great for some staff and staff are grateful, others have felt penalized: having to pay for and install internet, pay extra to increase their internet speed, find workspace at home, and in some cases working while helping their children with homework or caring for elderly parents.

It's not surprising that mental health¹ support is needed now more than ever with so many people being cooped up in homes and having to distance themselves from friends and family. Having Virginia Tech acknowledge their support and offer resources is encouraging.

As the staff representative of Virginia Tech, I advocate for all employees. On the admissions side we are making great strides with our enrollment numbers of underrepresented students. Work is still needed however on assisting our underrepresented, faculty, staff, and students feel included, valued, and treated with equal respect (see Virginia Tech's Principles of Community²). The university needs to continue to build up our diversity in faculty and staff hires in order to help build a community that feels they belong.

¹ March is mental health awareness month and the March 25th session will focus on workplace mental health. The link below has information on how to register and to submit your questions to our three experienced panelists.

<https://vtnews.vt.edu/notices/hr-2021-employee-zoom-workplace-mental-health.html>

² Virginia Tech Principles of Community | InclusiveVT | Virginia Tech;

<https://www.inclusive.vt.edu/Programs/vtpoc0.html>

