

## President's Open Session Remarks

BOV Meeting, August 31, 2021

Since we met last in June, almost all of our attention has been focused on preparing for an in-person fall semester, while addressing the evolving challenge presented by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Our students seem quite pleased - almost exuberant – at being back to living and learning in person. Required vaccines combined with enhanced ventilation and masks in indoor public spaces are the tools that are allowing us to remain in person while transmission in our larger communities is high, and vaccination rates are unfortunately low.

To date, 95% of our students and 88% of our employees have confirmed that they are fully vaccinated. 100% of the Board of Visitors is vaccinated. Thank you! Employees have until October 1<sup>st</sup> to submit proof of vaccination. Those who have been granted exemptions for sincerely-held religious beliefs or for medical reasons are subject to weekly testing and are expected to wear masks in all indoor spaces. We are currently recommending masks outdoors for everyone in large crowds for extended periods of time when distancing is not possible. We expect to be able to relax the mask requirements and recommendations when transmission in our community drops into the moderate level.

As for the status of COVID-19 on our campuses in in our communities, we are in a better spot than we were a year ago on our Blacksburg campus. Last year, we registered 157 positive tests on campus during the first week of classes with 15% positivity. During the first week this year, we had 28 positive tests on campus with 2% positivity. This is about in line with the modeling results you saw yesterday, which anticipates a lower number of infected individuals this fall compared to last fall. The primary reason for this reduction is our high vaccination rate. This is countered by a much more transmissible delta variant, a denser resident student population, and relaxed distancing requirements. We are far from breathing easy at this point, and we are especially worried about the high prevalence and high hospitalization numbers in Virginia. For example, in the New River Health District, the average daily case count is about twice what it was at this time last year. In Montgomery County, only about 45% of the population is vaccinated, and hospitalizations are approaching January 2021 levels.

As we have experienced throughout the pandemic, changes in our local conditions will be met by changes in our guidance for nonpharmaceutical interventions. To date, we do not have physical distancing requirements in place, and we hope to keep it that way. Masks remain optional in outdoor spaces. We recommend them in dense crowds outdoors, but we are leaving this as a personal choice since there is little evidence for outdoor transmission.

While we are responsible for setting in place base requirements and recommendations based on CDC guidance, it is incumbent on each individual to decide when and where it makes sense to go beyond the requirements and recommendations. If you suspect you have been exposed, or are experiencing even mild symptoms, you will do more to protect others. If you are immunocompromised or live with someone who is not vaccinated or who is immunocompromised, you may elect to do more. The university also has resources for addressing these situations on campus, should further accommodations be necessary.

Despite the fact that we are still in the midst of a pandemic, I am pleased to report that this semester feels more like a normal fall than a pandemic fall. Thanks are due to many employees and students who worked hard over the summer to prepare, and especially to the 93% of our population who are now fully vaccinated.

As you heard from Provost Clarke this morning, our entering class is outstanding, with an average high school GPA of 3.98. This is also the most diverse class in Virginia Tech history. Four years ago, we set an aspirational goal for our fall 2022 entering class, including transfers, of 40% underrepresented and underserved students. This URM/USS category includes any student that identifies as an underrepresented minority, or is Pell eligible, first generation or a veteran. Our entering class for Fall 2021 currently stands at 39.3%. We are almost there. At the same time, we established a milestone of 25% underrepresented minority. The entering cohort is over 19% URM for the second year in a row. Compare that to 13.2% in 2017 when we established those aggressive milestones. We will have the final numbers at census later this month.

With over 42,000 freshman applications for this fall, we had plenty of talent from which to choose. This is a testament to the growing regional and national

reputation of Virginia Tech, but it is also a dilemma for access that was magnified by an enrollment freeze that we implemented for this cycle. Land-grant universities are known for striving to admit any student who is prepared to succeed. During this cycle, we were not able to admit a large number of students who we believed would have been successful at Virginia Tech. In recent history, our admission rates have hovered between 65 and 70%. This year, that number is closer to 55%. Some of those students that were qualified but were not admitted this year will enter Virginia Tech through the transfer process in coming years, but others have moved on.

The purpose of the freeze at 30,000 undergraduates, a trigger that was set several years ago, was to allow time for the assessment of infrastructure and capacity both on campus and in the Blacksburg community. That process is underway. We are hopeful that we will be able to open the door a little wider next year, but for now, we are very pleased to be in a position to serve the students we now have on campus.

I am often asked about Virginia Tech's prospects for being invited for membership in the Association of American Universities, or the AAU. The 66 AAU institutions represent the leading research universities in the US and Canada. AAU institutions have influence and an advantage in recruiting faculty and graduate student talent. Among these 66 are 14 public land-grant universities, many of which are our peers (Ohio State, Iowa State, Arizona, Florida, UIUC, Maryland, Michigan State, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin, Purdue, Rutgers, UC Davis, Texas A&M). All of these 14 institutions are 1862 Morrill Act universities, as is Virginia Tech. The last of these 14 was admitted in 2001. The difference for Virginia Tech is that we only became a comprehensive university in 1970, and our growth spurt in research has been over the past 20 years when there have been no new land-grants added to the AAU roster.

When we established metrics and milestones for the *Virginia Tech Difference – Advancing Beyond Boundaries* Strategic Plan, we aligned many of those metrics with the leading indicators used for membership in the AAU. Those indicators show that we are well-positioned to move into this upper tier of AAU land-grant universities over the next several years. We are arguably ahead of some current members who were admitted as far back as the early 1900s, but we do have more work to do to make a convincing case. I am confident that our recent expansion in

human health sciences along with the Innovation Campus have us well positioned to be a leading land-grant research university in the coming years. We are close enough, that I think it is appropriate for Virginia Tech to state this aspiration publicly. Provost Clarke and I have asked Vice President of Research and Innovation, Dan Sui, to chart a course toward AAU eligibility. Fortunately, striving for AAU membership will not cause us to stray from our current trajectory, but there is no doubt it will require investments in effort and funds, as well as attention to addressing some of the obstacles that have impeded the growth of our research enterprise. Our focus on recruiting and retaining mid-career faculty talent, inter- and transdisciplinarity, shared facilities, and grand-challenge-scale efforts across diverse constituencies have us pointed in the direction that we believe AAU will be headed. We look forward to engaging our faculty, staff, students and partners to realize this next step in Virginia Tech's historical progression.

We are looking forward to the start of the Football season on Friday. It has been a long time since Lane stadium has had a seismic event. And congratulations to our men's soccer team for besting the #1 team in the nation and defending NCAA champs, Marshall.

Thanks, and Go Hokies!