

President's Remarks

Full Board Meeting Mon 1:15 PM Latham A/B – Open Session – November 16, 2020

What a year this has been! The challenge we are facing is unmatched in at least two generations. I am incredibly proud of our students, faculty and staff for their perseverance, creativity and commitment to others. Without the level of dedication demonstrated by the people of Virginia Tech and our surrounding communities, we would not have been able to stick to our plan for the fall semester.

We did not defeat COVID-19, but the disease did not defeat us either. I'd call it a stalemate. Our overall positivity rate has hovered around 3%. Random prevalence testing among undergraduates residing on campus has yielded a positivity of a little under 2%. Off-campus, it is just above 1%. And our surveillance of higher-contact employees has resulted in a positivity of about 0.1%. We are registering about 10 positive tests per day at Schiffert Health Center. These numbers have been remarkably stable for the past month.

Yet, the cumulative impact is that about 10% of the students living on campus have tested positive at some point this semester. Fortunately, we know of no serious health outcomes for these students so far, and our partners at the New River Health District tell us that there is no evidence of spread from our students to the community, or on campus in workplace or instructional settings.

The transition to remote instruction for the remainder of the semester is coming at just the right time. The pandemic is surging in the US and in most of Virginia. More significantly, everyone is exhausted. Our students have endured a challenging semester, as have our faculty. They have adapted, but one can only hang in there so long without a break. Our staff, including wage employees, need a break more than anyone. The challenges of housekeeping, food service, and supporting our students in quarantine and isolation have been unending, and many dedicated employees have been working continuously through the semester. I'd also like to thank our health and safety professionals, from the staff that keep one of the best testing labs in the country – at the Fralin Biomedical Research Center – operating at peak performance, to the case management professionals, the members of the Incident Management Team, our communicators, and the dedicated staff at Schiffert Health Center. There are many others to thank, but these are the folks whose work I see every day.

Faculty leadership has distinguished Virginia Tech during this pandemic. I mentioned the Molecular Diagnostics Testing Lab at our VTC Health Science and Technology Campus. Dr. Carla Finkelstein, Dr. Mike Friedlander and their colleagues, graduate students, postdocs and research staff have led us in supporting the testing needs of Virginia Tech and the surrounding communities. The One Lab contract announced last week will allow this lab to support all of Virginia as one of three Tier 2 contractors. It looks like they will be needed now more than

ever. Dr. Linsey Marr and Dr. Lisa Lee have developed global followings for their clear communication of science and public health principles, and Dr. Ron Fricker and Dr. Laura Hungerford have led our modeling group, supporting every key decision we make. Many other faculty and graduate students have directed their expertise to fighting the pandemic, including out public health students known as the “COVID Crushers.” This is an extraordinary moment for *Ut Prosim*.

After a brief respite over the winter break, we will be back at it in the spring. Lessons learned from the fall, combined with advanced testing technology, and hopefully a vaccine, give me optimism that we are ready for the spring, and hopeful that we will be able to make strides in returning to a mode of operation that will be closer to the post-pandemic next normal.

And while much of our attention has been devoted to the pandemic response, the life of the university goes on, initiatives have been advanced, and all three mission areas are making strides. I would like to acknowledge the incredible efforts of our 125-person Climate Action Commitment working groups, led by Dr. John Randolph. You heard their report, and we look forward to answering your questions before a vote at the March meeting. The renewed Climate Action Commitment will reassert Virginia Tech as a leader in sustainability for the years to come. This is THE existential challenge of our time – just ask our students.

Since our August meeting, Virginia Tech and its partners secured approval by the Alexandria City Council for the first academic building in North Potomac Yard. This milestone was the result of nearly two years of intense effort by the Innovation Campus Delivery Team, led by Dr. Brandy Salmon. Our partnership with the Virginia Tech Foundation was key to our success. Vice President and Executive Director Lance Collins, with the support of an all-star Advisory Board, is building the framework for what will become one of the most impactful projects in Virginia Tech history.

You may have seen the news today that we announced partnerships with five Virginia universities (JMU, CNU, UMW, Radford and Hollins) to create articulation pathways for 4+1 programs culminating in a Master’s degree in Computer Science or Computer Engineering at Virginia Tech. This is a major step toward broadening the pool of talent prepared for careers in technology-intensive industries in Virginia.

Throughout the unprecedented events of this academic year, I have been continually impressed (though not surprised) by the way the university has leaned into its mission. Discovery, outreach, and innovation are in our DNA, and it shows. Just two weeks ago, we were joined by Dr. Dan Sui as our new VP for Research and Innovation. Dan has extensive leadership experience at NSF and peer land-grant universities. He is already making a difference. I’d also like to thank Dr. Don Taylor for serving in the interim role during a year when research awards increased by 15%. Don didn’t merely keep the ship afloat – he steered us forward at high speed.

Staying with the vein of research and innovation, later this month, for the first time, Virginia Tech will receive a national ranking for entrepreneurship. The details are embargoed and I

can't reveal much more, but it's going to be a great tribute to the work going on at the Apex Center for Entrepreneurs.

I want to especially thank Jeff Veatch for the support he's given Apex from the beginning. His joint gift with Win Sheridan, Brian Callaghan, and Ted Hanson (the largest in Pamplin's history) gave Apex a solid foundation on which to build. He has provided important guidance as part of the Apex advisory board over the past five years, and has been instrumental in shaping and executing its strategic objectives.

Thank you, Jeff, and we look forward to sharing and celebrating this great news soon.