

Open Session President's Report to the BOV – April 4, 2022

We have had an eventful five months since we last met in November. We have certainly had our challenges, but overall, momentum has been building, and the future has never looked brighter for Virginia Tech. This positive outlook is a result of the incredible efforts of our students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends through the pandemic. It is also a reflection of our mindset in celebrating the first 150 years of our institution, while looking forward to the next 150. Last week's 1872 Forward celebration reconnected us to our roots in ways that we had not fully acknowledged before. Although there were many highlights, for me, the most moving was the convening of about 100 members of the Fraction family from all corners of the country. Thanks to Menah Pratt-Clarke and Bob Leonard for leading the Council on VT's History to create this moment and many others that have enlarged our understanding of how we became VAMC and whose sacrifice and hard work made our institution possible.

We have another eight months of celebrations and events ahead of us. Thanks to Angela Hayes and Rosemary Blieszner for leading the Sesquicentennial Steering Committee.

Contributing to our optimism and sense of momentum is the subsidence of the pandemic. Walking around campus, you will see very few outward signs of what we have experienced. Some members of our community are still wearing masks, but for the most part, the campus experience is back to normal. With the CDC's construction of COVID Community Levels, we have been able to align our principal metrics with those of the CDC to determine reasonable levels of mitigation. We have been at the "Low" level for the past few weeks. Should our level revert to "Medium" or "High" in the future, we now have the tools and experience to implement reasonable mitigation strategies. Of course, we are hoping that COVID-19 will behave as an endemic disease going forward.

Normally, the Board would be deciding on tuition rates at this meeting. Unfortunately, the General Assembly session in Richmond has not yet concluded. I feel confident that most of our objectives for this session will be met. I look forward to updating you soon when we have a budget and a plan for moving forward. Most at stake is access and affordability. There is a historic opportunity, given the resources available, for the commonwealth to make progress toward restoring the state's commitment to affordability while providing for employee compensation, including faculty, staff and graduate students, that will address the very real challenges of inflation, insufficient affordable housing and the rising cost of dependent care. Over the past two decades, the State's General Fund appropriation to support our educational mission has lost nearly 50% of its buying power, even while our enrollment of in-state students has grown. The competitiveness of our academic programs, the success of Advancement, and our focus on a distinctive student experience have masked the underlying weakness in Virginia's commitment to operating support for higher education.

To be fair, the commonwealth has provided exceptional support in other areas including facilities and the Tech Talent Investment Program. Yet, the bottom line is that we are not

affordable for low- and middle-income students. They still come to Virginia Tech because of the quality of the experience and the proven value of a Virginia Tech degree, but they are saddled with debt that restricts their choice of post-graduate pathways.

While affordability is a persistent challenge, I am very encouraged by what I am seeing from Richmond and DC in support for our aspiration to become a top-100 global research university. The investments by the commonwealth combined with generous donations from our alumni and friends are elevating our ability to impact the human experience in fields such as national security, quantum information sciences, artificial intelligence and whole health - our four "Research Frontiers." Between the National Security Institute, the Innovation Campus, our VT-Carilion Health Science & Technology Campus in Roanoke, and our newly activated DC partnership in pediatric oncology with Children's National Hospital and J&J's J Labs, we are building the foundation for impact. And beyond and between the Frontiers, we have extraordinary opportunities to contribute to Virginia's economic development, as our pending proposal on the Future of Transportation and Logistics with the US Department of Commerce exemplifies.

At our President's Council retreat in February, we focused on eight Strategic Priorities that will require multi-year investments. Those are the three Mission Initiatives – the Tech Talent Investment Program & Innovation Campus, Health & Biomedical Sciences, and Integrated Security; two enabling Infrastructure and Capacity initiatives – IT transformation and Human Resources transformation; and the Critical Program Initiatives – Athletics, Advancement and Access & Affordability. We have touched on all of these initiatives at this Board meeting, some more deeply than others. Of course, there are many other important investments that we need to make outside these eight Strategic Priorities, but there are never enough resources, and we must be guided in our choices by our strategic plan.

Among the challenges we faced in returning back to fully in-person operation last fall was an unsettling number of sexual misconduct incidents, especially involving first-year students. No such incidents of sexual violence are to be tolerated, and we have devoted significant resources and effort to support survivors, but our experience in the fall made it clear that we need to refocus on prevention and education as well. We have also identified communications and transparency as priorities for improvement. In November, I appointed the Sexual Violence Culture and Climate working group, led by Katie Polidoro. The working group has been meeting biweekly. They have organized into six teams, Community Engagement, Transparent Operations, Cultural Transformation, Assessment and 2019 Recommendation Implementation. Nearly 30 undergraduate and graduate students have joined these teams, and about 100 more are directly engaged. I have asked the working group to focus on the entering class this fall. We can make a real and immediate difference by making sure that we do not let this onboarding opportunity pass without focused attention.

Later this summer, the working group will broaden its scope to take a more holistic approach to sexual violence. Changing the culture and climate at Virginia Tech is not a one-off activity. Every year, our university welcomes nearly 10,000 new members from all over the world, and we

have to start anew. The recommendations and implementation achieved by the working group must be sustainable in the dynamic sense of the word.

Speaking of climate and culture, yesterday, we had a vigorous discussion of free expression in an academic environment, and the intersections with the 1st amendment, the Code of Virginia, our Principles of Community, and our commitment to academic freedom. The ability to have civil conversations across differences is at the core of the university experience. I have asked our provost to assemble a working group to take up this topic and to consider the merits of adopting the Chicago Principles or a similar statement to augment our current university statements on this topic.

Finally, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the steady and transformative leadership of our Director of Athletics, Whit Babcock. For eight years, Whit and his team have been quietly and methodically building culture and expectations. From the facilities, to the staff, to the support of our student-athletes, to the engagement of Hokie Nation, Virginia Tech Athletics is becoming a Champion brand. Since our last BOV meeting, we named a new football coach. I think you may have noticed. In the ensuing months, Brent Pry has filled out his staff, and won over the Hokie faithful.

Just in the last few weeks, Virginia Tech has won three ACC Championships – men's and women's indoor track and field, and the Men's basketball tournament - and named two individual NCAA Champions, Rachel Baxter in the pole vault and Lindsay Butler in the 800 meter. Elizabeth Kitley and Justyn Mutts swept the top ACC scholar-athlete awards for ACC basketball. The men's and women's basketball teams both went to the NCAA tournament – that's five in a row for the men and twice for the women. Our women's track and field team finished 6th at the indoor NAAs, and wrestling finished 8th at the NAAs. Mekhi Lewis won ACC wrestler of the year. The men's swimming and diving team recorded its top NCAA finish in history at #11 and the women placed 23rd. Dave Cianelli swept the ACC Coach of the Year awards for Indoor Track and Field, winning this award for both the men's and women's teams, and Tony Robie won ACC wrestling coach of the year. And that is not enough of course. Our softball team is currently ranked #5 in the country.

Have you noticed the way these teams win? It's all about teamwork, resilience and humility. And they are having fun! That sounds like a bunch of Hokies to me.

Go Hokies!