

Good afternoon Board of Visitors,

I come to you today, after a long two years of pandemic, and it is good to see many of your faces again. There is no real data upon mask usage on campus, but I would estimate about one in ten undergraduates continue to wear masks. Masks were always loosely enforced at best in most places - the biggest change has been in the classroom. Students seem more inclined to socialize when they can see the smiles of their peers. Those still wearing their mask are not judged verbally, but as the weeks have gone by, many students who wore masks initially after the change have “caved” to the peer pressure. Fortunately, the high vaccination and booster rate among students has allowed for the return of traditions that students missed out on last year, including a whopping four Ring Dances in a week and a sold out concert performance by Gunna.

As the transition away from masks occurred unexpectedly in the middle of the semester, there needs to be adequate accommodations for those students who are most vulnerable to finish out the semester safely. Before the mandate was lifted, the Cultural and Community Centers, representing a huge range of minority students on campus, wrote a letter to administration advocating for the retention of the mask mandate. The Graduate and Professional Student Senate and the Faculty Senate jointly wrote a similar letter. I myself wrote a letter along the same lines. Now that the mandate has been lifted, I am not advocating for its return, but some students in the immunocompromised community have raised concerns regarding the continuation of their academic progress. Services for Students with Disabilities is responsible for handling these accommodation requests, but without centralized guidance that favors students, requests have been largely unsuccessful. The bar for hybrid modality is “high flex”, but in many cases students can still receive a quality education without microphones in every corner of the room.

Seeing everyone’s face may have positive impacts on our mental health. But as we discuss tuition and fees at this Board meeting, I would like to call for more resources, especially telehealth solutions, devoted to mental health on campus. This semester, several back to back incidents shook the community to its core. A student shared her domestic abuse experience and it went viral nationwide. A shooting occurred downtown leading to injuries and the death of a local high schooler, reminding Hokies of the scars of April 16th. Not to mention two suicides this

semester alone. While these incidents are symptoms of broader issues, we can at least improve the mental health systems at this university to support students after community-wide trauma. Our mental health is ranked highly amongst our peers; Cook Counseling recently received a number 1 ranking by the Princeton Review, and we received the 2022 Active Minds Health Campus award, due to the hard work of Hokie Wellness. This is thanks to prior investments by the Board, and we should continue to be leaders on this. Three years ago Cook Counseling underwent a restructuring that lowered wait times, by implementing a triage system to encourage more group therapy and referrals to Hokie Wellness or other third parties. However, one on one treatment continues to be highly in demand and wait times of three to four weeks are all too common. Additionally, students seek a higher diversity of counselors, especially for marginalized communities and international students, as well as not having to rely upon counselors who are still in training. As we are now all accustomed to Zoom calls, I'd like to encourage the use of telehealth options that give students access to a broader range of counselors, who may not necessarily want to live in Blacksburg.

Another step towards positive mental health is helping students feel safe on campus. Sexual violence has been a pervasive issue this year, raised up by the voices of the United Feminist Movement (UFM). As women's month just ended, the UFM hosted their annual "Take Back the Night" rally. Fortunately, this semester we have seen far fewer Clery alerts than last, but of course, the work still needs to be done. President Sands formed the Sexual Violence Culture and Climate Working Group in November, charged with two goals: 1) transforming the culture of sexual violence at Virginia Tech, and 2) having concrete changes ready for the incoming class of freshmen living on-campus. Short term steps have already been taken, such as improvements to the Clery Act alerts, hosting a listening session with dozens of students, and centralizing resources on a single website.

While I think the work group is heading in the right direction, there needs to be greater student representation on the main committee. There is a disparity between the two goals of the charge. The elements that contribute to culture are not limited to the residence halls. Many incidents go unseen off-campus as well. Thus, as we focus initially upon changes to the first year experience, which happens to align with the Residential Well Being model and changes to new student

orientation being implemented next year, we must be careful not to entrench practices that negatively impact culture on a more holistic level. The inclusion of more student voices, especially of UFM, on the main committee, more than just the subcommittees, would directly leverage the perspectives of students who have been doing this work for years.

Myself, Phil, and a delegation of students from the Undergraduate Student Senate traveled to Richmond last month to lobby the General Assembly, and spoke about many of the same issues I bring forth to you today. This cooperation between the BOV reps and student government is unprecedented, and a strong reflection of the benefits of this new Senate model. I will continue to work with the USS and the rest of the student body to bring you the student voice as we all gear up for finals and the end of the year.

Remarks to the Board of Visitors

April 2022

Draft

Good morning Rector Long, Vice Rector Baine, members of the Board, President Sands, administrators, guests, and fellow Hokies—

One of the personal goals I set for myself during my term as the Graduate Student Representative to the Board was to see as many of the Virginia Tech campuses as possible, to learn firsthand about our statewide and global impact. To that end, I spent some time during Spring Break visiting the Steger Center in Riva San Vitale, Switzerland where I spent the day with graduate and undergraduate students, toured the facility and town, and met with the director. I came back with two takeaways:

First, we should do all we can to make study abroad experiences accessible to any student who wants to take advantage of the opportunity, reduce barriers to entry. Some of the students I met with from rural Southside and Southwest Virginia have never and may never again have an immersive cultural experience like that.

Second, I encourage all of you, if you have not yet seen the Steger Center or our other global programs firsthand, to visit and see the great things director Sara Steinert Borella and her staff are doing. I know they're having a sesquicentennial celebration at the end of June and would be happy to have you.

Shifting to graduate students specifically, we have made significant progress over the last few months in laying a foundation for a better graduate student experience.

[The 2020 Graduate Education Task Force Report](#) found that our graduate student stipends are not competitive with our peer institutions. In many programs, funding is year-to-year or only guaranteed for a portion of the time it takes to complete a degree. International students, many of whom legally can't work over the summer, are disproportionately impacted. Graduate students find it hard to pay their bills, buy essential groceries, seek medical care when needed, pay for childcare, and survive on the low income, especially with the rising costs of living. Graduate students experience these challenges despite efforts the university has made, such as covering about 90% of health insurance premiums, the childcare co-op, and safety net programs like the food emergency fund. More help is needed.

To this end, the Graduate and Professional Student Senate led the charge to forming a taskforce to assess and make recommendations to resolve the complex issue of graduate assistant compensation. I want to thank President Sands, Provost Clarke, all the stakeholders involved, and especially the GPSS for their leadership and collaboration in undertaking this important first step.

Related to the issue of cost of living is affordable housing for graduate students. Again, this issue is complex, multi-faceted, and extends to all our campuses:

- Recent market conditions have created a dramatic rise in the cost of rent in and around the New River Valley. Costs also continue to rise in Roanoke and Northern Virginia
- The only student housing in Northern Virginia is scheduled to be shut down at the end of this semester. We continue to expand our presence in the expensive DC-metro area—especially with the Innovation Campus—but planning for basic needs like housing for students and staff are on the backburner.
- Back here across campus, demand for housing in Donaldson Brown, the only on-campus graduate student housing, has never outstripped supply. We need to ask ourselves why that is the case and what, if anything, should be done about it.

These are just some of the laundry list of issues related to graduate student housing. To become a leader among our peers in graduate student housing, we need a comprehensive plan that articulates the problem and identifies solutions. We'll need to involve non-traditional stakeholders in the conversation, including transportation, local housing partners, local government representatives from beyond the immediate vicinity of each campus, and so on. Solutions will need to be innovative and will require buy-in from all partners.

One of our most passionate student leaders, GPSS representative Alice Fox, has taken the lead on beginning to assemble a working group to tackle the issue from the New River Valley perspective. I look forward to working with her, the GPSS, and others across the University to put together a plan for moving this critical issue forward.

Finally, graduate students are concerned that we do not have a seat on the Sexual Violence Culture and Climate Work Group, though we are represented on subcommittees. While we understand the Work Group's focus is currently on undergraduate concerns, graduate students play an integral part in undergraduate campus life including teaching them, living with them, and interacting with them around campus and in organizations. Graduate students are at the same time peers, mentors, and authority figures for undergrads. Our perspective is critical to this important conversation.

Thank you.

Staff Senate Constituency Report
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
April 3- 4, 2022 Presented by Serena Young, Staff Senate President

Rector Long, members of the Board of Visitors, President Sands, administrators, and guests: Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you about Virginia Tech's staff.

Spring is in the air, and I think we are all excited about that. It feels like we may be starting to get back to a normal functioning society. I am happy to announce our Staff Senate Constitution and Bylaws have been updated and we are excited to be presenting them before the full Staff Senate for review/first reading later this month. This was quite the undertaking which was well overdue, and I would like to personally thank the committee members and April Myers for all their time, work, and expertise.

This year's McComas Staff Leadership Seminar was cancelled based on feedback given by staff feeling overwhelmed and not wanting to add one more item to their overwhelming list of tasks. We also decided we want to give the seminar a revamp. We do plan on coming back next year bigger and better and hopefully Staff will be in a better place to participate as well. We are proceeding with acknowledging two award winners this year which will be announced next month. We felt it was still important to give staff recognition given current staff morale.

Staff continue to feel unheard, unseen, unappreciated, and undervalued by administration, leadership, and supervisors. When staff regularly must request to be included in conversations, committees, performance evaluations, or the lack thereof, to have their voice represented or just to be included, this is a major issue/concern. From the very beginning, and certainly pre-COVID, staff have relayed concerns about lack of communication and transparency on the part of decision-makers at this university. When you add these concerns over inequities in how staff in different areas of the university are treated, this exacerbates the trust issue further. An example relates to varying levels of feedback that staff receive from their supervisors: there are no official consequences for supervisors who neglect their responsibility to conduct annual reviews with staff (as we understand it, the onus has been on staff to encourage their supervisors to do this on an annual basis), so one staff member may receive feedback on their work and be encouraged to pursue professional development opportunities, while a staff member with a different supervisor may get none of that. This also can affect raises when all or part is based on merit.

There is concern that circumstances related to COVID didn't so much create cracks in the foundation of trust staff place in VT leadership, as much as it exposed cracks that were already there and are now widening. Staff are the backbone of this university, and it is time for administrators, leadership, and supervisors to take action/address the issues/concerns staff have been voicing for quite some time now. We feel immediate action is needed because we are losing valuable staff at an alarming rate. It has been reported by some staff who have not made the decision to leave, they don't know how much more they can handle and are actively looking elsewhere for better employment opportunities. Staff are weary, frustrated, and angry with administration/leadership, when this university claims to be a great place to work and say they are working on retention efforts as well as always mentioning our Principles of Community. Staff want to see action because words thus far have proven to be for the most part empty.

I want the Board to know, there are staff who are happy with their job and have great supervision. Not to mention the Deans made a short video giving thanks to staff which I thought was a great touch. Nothing is Doom & Gloom I promise but based on what I have had reported from staff the percentage breakdown would probably be about 20% are happy, 20% in between, and 60% unhappy. This percentage obviously could be much better and it's my opinion, it would not be hard to fix, but it is going to take intentional on-going efforts to fix the issues and concerns mentioned above. Making significant progress is needed to prove to staff they are heard, they are seen, and that they valuable to this university.

There is good news though, there are strategies for ameliorating inequities, and it seems that any such strategy would require more training and guidance for leadership and supervisors in decision-making as it relates to future of work-type situations, equitability, and inclusivity, along with accountability for supervisors and clearer signaling of university expectations for supervisor responsibilities and treatment of their employees. As I've heard it said many times, people don't leave/quit jobs- they leave/quit supervisors.

Serving as Staff Senate President has given me opportunities to meet many of our wonderful staff members. We have an extraordinary talented group of individuals. They are people who care about this university, their job, the students, and the ALL of the people here. They truly serve under our motto of UT Prosim and they serve the university and our greater community regularly. These individuals are worth fighting for and worth retaining. Please support Administration, Leadership, and Supervisors to take whatever action necessary to make sure Staff know they are of utmost importance to this university.

On behalf of Staff Senate, I would like to thank you for listening today. I appreciate your attention today and I thank you for the opportunity to share Staff thoughts. I look forward to sharing our ongoing progress and collaborating with you all to make this year the best one yet!

Sincerely,
Serena D. Young

Administrative and Professional Faculty Constituent Report

April 3, 2022

Presented by Holli Gardner Drewry, A/P Faculty Senate President

Good afternoon, Rector Long, Board of Visitors members, President Sands, Provost Clarke, administrators, and guests.

I am honored to be here to represent administrative and professional faculty. I want to thank you for your support of the A/P Faculty Senate and for welcoming an A/P faculty representative to sit with you.

The number of A/P faculty members has grown from approximately 200 in 2006 to 2,106. This growth occurred as a response to student population growth and the Restructured Higher Education Financial and Administrative Operations Act of 2005 which allowed the conversion of existing staff at pay band 5 and higher to AP faculty. A/P faculty serve in a variety of roles including student affairs, health care, athletics, academic support, extension, research, advancement, senior administration, and administrative support. Many of the people responsible for organizing this meeting, presenting, and in attendance, today are A/P faculty.

With growth comes challenges. The A/P faculty rank's rapid growth resulted in inconsistent compensation practices, job titles, and position descriptions. According to the Human Resources Job Architecture Project's initial findings, of the approximately 2,000 A/P faculty members there are 1,500 unique titles. The A/P Faculty Senate has reached out to Human Resources to volunteer to help with the job architecture and performance management projects. For A/P faculty these projects have the potential to greatly impact job descriptions, titles, career pathways, and competitive compensation. We want to be actively engaged in this project and HR has welcomed us to participate.

In addition, during this inaugural year for the A/P Faculty Senate, we are working to establish procedures. We're making adjustments along the way as we figure out the best practices. One of our senators described it as paving the road and driving on it at the same time. We all agreed that this metaphor fits our first nine months. Other work we are doing includes:

- establishing pathways or a framework for A/P faculty to contact their senators and share their feedback
- crafting resolutions to add A/P faculty representation on university committees where we are not already represented
- reviewing the A/P faculty section of the faculty handbook, specifically to review the Grievance and the Allegations of Unprofessional or Unethical Conduct processes
- discussing the equitable treatment of A/P faculty at the supervisory level as it relates to flexible work arrangements, performance management, and non-reappointment
- exploring the causes and possible solutions for employee turnover across the A/P faculty rank but especially in Student Affairs and Information Technology
- taking a closer look at the work situations and challenges for A/P faculty working outside of the New River Valley with a specific focus on extension employees located in each county, and
- responding to other Senate and Commission resolution requests for comment or review

As you can tell, A/P faculty have embraced the opportunity to play an active role in university governance. I look forward to sharing more information about the progress we are making at future meetings.

Constituency Report Faculty April 2022

The touchstone for the concept of academic freedom is the AAUP's *Declaration of Principles*. Written in 1915 and updated several times since, many of us are familiar with it as the *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom*. It includes the following key passages:

The purpose of this statement is to promote public understanding and support of academic freedom and tenure and agreement upon procedures to ensure them in colleges and universities. Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.

Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning.

At its core, the principle of academic freedom seeks to protect our curiosity from our fear, to shield one part of our nature – our desire to discover and invent – from another part of our nature – the tendency to fear things that are new or different. Our intellectual and creative history includes many ideas, artistic styles, and discoveries that were initially feared, laughed at, or that carried the risk of stigma and even death. Early in his career, Monet was called childish and ridiculed for his blobs of paint. Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for holding that the Earth revolved around the sun.

Between its two parts – freedom of research and freedom of teaching – the principle of academic freedom has always been more complicated when it comes to teaching, in part because freedom of teaching and freedom of expression are largely inseparable. Particularly during periods of social upheaval, the relationship between authority and expression means that any statement about freedom, whatever else it may be, is also a political statement. Ideas about freedom of expression are therefore inseparable from considerations of who has the power to determine what the phrase means and how that meaning is enforced. Neither the AAUP statement nor the more recent *Chicago Principles* are particularly helpful when it comes to navigating these political waters, at guiding universities trying to deal with controversial instruction or speakers. But while the AAUP statement is inadequate in this regard, the *Chicago Principles* are disturbing because they seek to absolve universities of any responsibility to consider issues of power and legitimacy in wrestling with questions about free speech. The *Chicago Principles* include the statement that “it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive”, without considering that such a responsibility may be essential to fulfilling what should be the overarching concern of a university as stated in the AAUP's principles, “the free search for truth and its free expression.”

The absence of the word “truth” in the *Chicago Principles* troubles me, for I don't know how to separate the concept of freedom of expression from some consideration of the truth of that expression. Would a teacher who insists that the world is flat and offers that idea as “truth” have any place in a Virginia Tech classroom? What about a teacher or speaker who believes that the Holocaust never happened, or that women are intellectually inferior to men, or that any race is superior to another? Virginia Tech's conceptualization of academic freedom should embrace these complexities and not set them aside, including the possibility that intellectual and moral progress require accepting certain ideas as established and beyond the reach of reasonable debate.

On the other hand, there are questions that are not and will never be settled, that are so complicated and important and so impacted by changing circumstances that we are required to reconsider them on a regular basis

if they are to have any use. In a democratic society, our efforts to define the word *freedom* in any context must have that living quality, perhaps most of all when it comes to freedom of expression.

The AAUP statement remains Virginia Tech's best foundation for our shared understanding of what academic freedom is and requires. If the time has come to revisit that document, to expand on and clarify it for our times, the Faculty Senate is ready to lead that effort.