

Undergraduate Student Constituency Report  
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors  
November 17, 2019

Madelynn Todd – Undergraduate Representative to the Board of Visitors

Good afternoon Rector Valeiras, President Sands, members of the Board of Visitors, and distinguished guests.

It's finally fall! And I think we can all agree there is no place more beautiful than Virginia Tech this time of year! Many positive changes have taken place since our last board meeting. One of my personal favorites is that, with the help of Native at VT, Virginia Tech has recognized Indigenous Peoples Day. Such recognition encourages an understanding and acceptance of one of the smallest minorities here at Virginia Tech while strengthening our culture of inclusion and diversity. Another monumental event set to take place at the next University Council meeting on December 2<sup>nd</sup> is the reading of the Religious Accommodations Resolution. Students and faculty alike are highly anticipating the passage of this resolution sometime in the near future.

On October 7, 2019, with the support and assistance of Dr. Chris Kiwus, Associate Vice President and Chief Facilities Officer, and Mr. Jack Washington, Program Coordinator for the Office of University Planning, students and administrators conducted a campus safety and accessibility walk. The campus walk was a huge success and several safety and accessibility issues were noted such as areas where lighting was insufficient and accessibility was limited or non-existent. For example, in East Ambler-Johnston, there is one community entrance at the front of the building which all students are required to use unless an exception is made through the proper channels. Students use this entrance in an effort to foster a sense of community and encourage dialogue. While this is great idea, the entrance is only accessible via stairs. For myself, I have special access to the side doors which was approved through Housing and Residence Life. This, obviously, would not be the case for visitors.

Continuing on with the issue of accessibility, there are many improvements that still need to be implemented at Virginia Tech. There are too few ramps, many inaccessible restrooms, a lack of signage, and several unsafe curb cutouts that exit onto the street. It is understood that projects are in the works to improve accessibility, but is there anything that can be done in the interim? Can we leverage the talent of Virginia Tech faculty, staff, and students to make changes now? With one of the best engineering colleges in the country, is it not possible to engineer more accessible restrooms or safer curb cutouts? Also, social programs, clubs, internships, and study abroad opportunities need to consider the needs of those with physical and mental disabilities. It truly is time to make disabled students feel more welcome and less of a burden.

Many undergraduate students still feel the stress from the large freshman class size. Especially concerning is the overcrowding of busses during peak traffic times. Many of the Holiday Inn Express residents, as well as students who travel from different points along Prices Fork Road, are still experiencing overcrowded busses despite the extra drivers that were hired at the beginning of the fall semester. In fact, many undergraduate students have reported that they frequently cross Prices Fork Road and walk to class to avoid being late. Obviously this is a safety issue, as the road is busy with fast moving traffic. In addition, as temperatures drop and inclement weather becomes the norm, busses will likely become even more crowded and the road conditions will deteriorate increasing the likelihood of an accident or injury.

Another immediate concern for undergraduates is a perceived lack of open and honest communication between them and university administration. Often, many feel as though they must get information on important issues from outside sources such as news articles or other unofficial sources. And when they do receive communication from official channels, they believe that much effort is spent on ensuring that the university is painted in the best light possible at the expense of the truth. At a recent student luncheon with President Sands, an idea was proposed to develop a student leader communications workshop with two main objectives. The first goal would be to provide students with an idea of the concerns and considerations that apply to official university mass communications. The second objective would be to provide communications tips and best practices on a general level, enabling these student leaders to more effectively communicate what they have learned to their constituents now and in the future.

Another hot topic around campus is the new scooter initiative. Students are divided in regards to their support of this program. Many are in favor of the scooter initiative as evidenced by data that shows more than 1,000 uses per day of these devices. However, other undergraduates feel that these scooters have caused several safety and accessibility issues. While there may be few reported accidents, students and faculty have provided input that shows scooters are often left in inappropriate locations such as accessibility ramps, in front of garbage cans, and in parking spaces. I have been able to compile a growing collection of pictures and dialogue to support this.

Thank you all very much for your time today. As always, it is an honor to serve as the Undergraduate Representative to the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors. Please reach out to me if you have any questions or I can be of assistance in any way. Go Hokies!

Graduate Student Constituency Report  
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors  
November 17, 2019  
Ryan King - Graduate Representative to the Board of Visitors

Good afternoon members of the Board, members of the university, and all other guests in the room.

This report is somber, and it wasn't much fun to write. I would much rather come to you and report on all the great achievements of the graduate student body, and hopefully I will one day have that opportunity. But today, there are other items that require our attention.

I will start by echoing Madelynn's points on communication within Virginia Tech as well as concern over the scooters. There is a consensus among the graduate student body that communication efforts directed internally seem to occur as an afterthought, once all external facing communications are wrapped up. My constituents do not feel as though the message that eventually trickles down to them is always one of transparency. Furthermore, several graduate students have expressed concern that the scooters create a real safety and accessibility issue - we continue to hear "we will fix these issues in the near future," but the near future seems to never come.

For the remainder of the report, I want to talk about survival.

Last month, Dr. Ralph Hall's report on food security among students at Virginia Tech was released publicly. Among the results was the alarming statistic that a total of 35% of graduate student respondents had food security issues. In the report, 21% of graduate students were identified as having low food security based on the USDA food security instrument, and 14% of graduate students were identified as having very low food security - meaning that 14% of graduate respondents frequently miss meals due to an inability to obtain food. In addition to the harrowing statistic that 1 in 3 graduate students have problems with food security, I recently learned, and have confirmed, that we have several graduate students who are experiencing temporary homelessness during their graduate studies at Virginia Tech. We have a serious problem within our community. As graduate enrollment numbers continue to decline nationally, it is more important than ever that Virginia Tech show a commitment to its graduate student population if the university wants to remain competitive in graduate education.

One recommendation, provided in the report by Dr. Hall's group, that could begin to address both food insecurity and homelessness is to raise the graduate student stipend. As the annual stipend increase is insufficient to cover both increases in cost of living as well as cost of tuition, choosing to attend graduate school is more expensive than ever. I ask you to take a moment and put yourself in our student's shoes. Consider what life is like earning less than \$20,000/year (which is actually higher than the average graduate student stipend), despite having earned a Bachelor's degree, and needing to pay for rent, food, books, educational supplies, a computer, transportation, undergraduate loans, and various other costs associated with graduate school. Now, do the same exercise but imagine you're an international student supporting a family, and your partner is not permitted to work due to visa constraints. Personally, I understand the national decline in graduate school enrollment. I have often questioned, and hear my

colleagues question, why we choose to work 50-60 hour weeks in labs for what amounts to less than minimum wage when many of us could live quite well on the backs of our Bachelors degrees.

Some techniques our peer institutions have implemented to support graduate students include: raising graduate student stipends, creating food pantries to help offset the cost of meals (The VCU Ram Pantry is a great example of this), subsidizing cost of living expenses such as rent, and providing affordable child care.

While graduate students do hope we can continue to discuss a stipend increase and would welcome cost of living subsidies, we realize these are intermediate to long-term solutions to a problem deserving immediate action. In the interim, I want to highlight one current effort to combat food insecurity. In a true embodiment of the *Ut Prosim* spirit, two graduate students - Anurag Mantha and Courtney Steele started a campaign titled Food Access for Students to raise funds that will provide acute assistance to Virginia Tech students seeking food. Within one month of publicly launching the campaign they have been featured on the local news, in the Roanoke Times, and most importantly have raised \$7,500+, that will go directly to assisting students in need (See end of report for further description of Food Access for Students).

There are a limited number of other resources currently available for students, including a small food pantry through partnership with Manna Ministries, emergency assistance funding through the Dean of Students, and the work-life grant through the Graduate School. But these programs alone are not nearly enough. Student affairs is also convening a working group, set to really get going in the spring, to address food insecurity on campus.

It used to be that when students talked about “surviving graduate school,” they were speaking to the long hours, the hard work, and the intense focus that was required to come out on the other side successfully. Today, “surviving graduate school,” has a much more literal connotation. We have graduate students who are hungry and homeless. As we all saw in the mental health task force report, the incidence of mental health issues in graduate students is at an all time high and on the rise, but that shouldn’t come as a surprise. Graduate school has always been hard, rightfully so, but making ends meet is becoming increasingly complicated for graduate students as well. The graduate school has taken several steps to give students an opportunity to thrive, as opposed to simply survive, during graduate school. For instance, there is a health/wellness room, free food events such as the GLC cafe and breakfast/lunch with Dean DePauw, several workshops intended to create community and supportive environments. While we are very grateful for these events, they are limited in frequency and only occur on the Blacksburg campus. What we desperately need is a university wide, not Blacksburg-wide, initiative to support all graduate students at Virginia Tech. And a good place to start is the assistantship stipend table.

Thank you for your time,

Ryan King

**Food Access for Students**

Food Access for Students is an organization co-founded by Cortney Steele and Anurag Mantha, both graduate students at Virginia Tech. Based on the results of a recent survey conducted at Virginia Tech, one-in-three students on the Blacksburg campus have identified as having low or very low food security. Food Access for Students is [fundraising on GoFundMe](#) to develop a short-term food access referral program open to all undergraduate, graduate and professional students at all locations of Virginia Tech. They intend to provide grocery cards in \$200 denominations to any student who contacts them. In addition to the short-term food access program, they are working on following the lead of the highly successful [Ram Pantry at VCU](#) to develop an inclusive, confidential, and independent food bank at Virginia Tech open to the entire university community. They are exploring setting up this program with the University Ombuds Office, as the mission of the office aligns well with the mission of the food bank. The University Ombuds Office currently does not have the resources or a permanent office to support this program. Anurag and Cortney welcome any and all support from Virginia Tech and the Virginia Tech Foundation in their endeavors. They can be contacted by emailing [foodaccess4students@gmail.com](mailto:foodaccess4students@gmail.com) or contacting Anurag ([anuragm@vt.edu](mailto:anuragm@vt.edu)) or Cortney ([cnsteele@vt.edu](mailto:cnsteele@vt.edu)) directly.

**Faculty Constituency Report  
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors  
November, 2019**

John Ferris, President—VT Faculty Senate

Good afternoon Rector Valeiras, President Sands, members of the Board, Provost Clarke, and all others gathered here today.

I would like to speak to you today about tenure, but first I'd like to recap discussions on time and money.

Again I ask that two items remain paramount in all deliberations of policies and practices, to:

1. Efficiently use faculty time  
Faculty time should be spent doing things that put into practice our expertise.
2. Respect faculty life outside of Virginia Tech  
Create time when faculty are free from Virginia Tech obligations. No contact. No meetings. No work required by our university.

And while the faculty time bucket is now overfilled, the faculty pay bucket needs filling. Faculty pay remains in the lowest 30-35th percentile when the state expectation is the 60th, and 2-3% cost of living allowances do not move the needle. Again I ask the Board of Visitors to:

3. Compensate Faculty Workload and Commitment with Commensurate Pay  
Commit to 6% raises every year until our faculty are paid at the 60th percentile. Support our Strategic Priority to "Be a Destination for Talent" with the goal being to "attract, retain, and develop the talents of faculty and staff."

These items address lowest responses on the recent COACHE survey: dissatisfaction with workload and work-life balance.

Which brings me to tenure.

Tenure is defined by the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure [jointly formulated and endorsed by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)].

"A tenured appointment is an indefinite appointment that can be terminated only for cause or under extraordinary circumstances such as financial exigency and program discontinuation."

Remember that before coming to the university, tenured faculty work hard to establish themselves as experts in their field, then go through an 8-month vetting process to be given the opportunity for a 6-year interview. We call this 6-year interview the tenure probationary period.

Do staff and non-tenured faculty work hard? Yes, of course they do. But this is about the role of tenure.

The principal purpose of tenure is to safeguard academic freedom, which is necessary for all who teach and conduct research in higher education. Free inquiry, free expression, and open dissent are critical for student learning, the advancement of knowledge, and a functioning democracy.

If faculty members can lose their positions for what they say in the classroom or for what they write in an article, they are unlikely to risk addressing controversial issues or, indeed, to innovate in their approach or research. Innovation requires a willingness to try out new ideas. The common good is not served when business, political, or other entities can threaten the livelihood of researchers and instructors, and thereby suppress the results of their work or modify their judgements. When faculty members can lose their positions because of their speech, publications, or research findings, they cannot properly fulfill their core responsibilities to advance, transmit, and transform knowledge.

Therefore, it is critical to have systems in place to protect academic freedom. To protect the quality of teaching and research and thus the integrity of our institution. Tenure serves that purpose.

So then, I ask that you honor tenure and the value that it brings to Virginia Tech with the following request:

#### 4. Preserve Tenure

- Reject the hollowing-out of tenure by rejecting any misuse of the term. Accept only the true definition of tenure: an indefinite appointment that can be terminated only for cause or under extraordinary circumstances.
- Protect the integrity of our institution by restoring the role of tenured faculty. The number of undergraduate students continues to grow. In the past 4 years the number of undergraduate student credit hours has grown by over 12%. The number of tenured faculty has not changed. And we now face an enrollment surge.

Academic Year	Total Student Credit Hours (SCH)	Tenured Instructional Faculty (TIF)	SCH/TIF
2014-15	428,537	1,064	403
2015-16	448,716	1,079	416
2016-17	453,396	1,050	432
2017-18	470,756	1,047	450
2018-19	482,646	1,063	454
Percent Increase	12.6%	-0.1%	
Annual increase	3.0%	0.0%	

Since we are increasingly relying on metrics, many on faculty performance, I'm asking that you restore a critical metric for the health of our institution. Grow the tenured ranks proportionately with the undergraduate ranks. Specifically,

Return to a maximum of 400 undergraduate student credit hours per tenured instructional faculty.

Are our staff and non-tenured faculty critical? Yes, of course.

Should our ranks in these areas grow as well? Yes, of course.

Please do not frame this as a zero-sum game. Faculty and staff are being asked to support an ever-growing number of students, in an ever growing number of locations, comply with ever increasing regulation, and implement an array of new initiatives and programs. This request is only that the tenured faculty ranks be proportionate to our growth.

These times of significant growth and change are when tenure matters the most.

Restore the ranks of tenured faculty and our ability to champion the academy and the academic freedom of our institution.

Thank you.



Staff Senate Constituency Report  
Virginia Tech Board of Directors  
November 17 & 18, 2019  
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 honored to be here today.

Communication is my main topic today.

A few things have occurred in the past few months to warrant this discussion. I was asked to sit on a search committee for a higher level position at our university and while reviewing the job description there was no mention of staff. But there were mention of students and faculty with some statistics added about research and such. When I brought this up to the chair of the position and I'm sure it was shared upward to the company we are working with for this search, surely just to appease me, the word staff was included, no statistics or anything to shout how great we are, "staff" was just added. So, putting us in as an afterthought is just as insulting. Just something to keep in mind.

Then a capital campaign is rolled out. On October 11th VT news there is a 4.13 min. video for us to view as well as an over hour long video that Dr. Sands is in. Nowhere in both videos are staff mentioned. Numerous staff have reached out to me with complaints of how "Virginia Tech does not care about its staff" and lots of frustration for being left out. I reached out to and spoke with Tracy Vosburgh and she shared that the leaving staff out of the videos was intentional. This is a huge campaign and that these particular videos were specific to donors (alumni) and that the videos were geared towards this particular audience. She assured me that the staff would have opportunities in the future with this campaign. I appreciated the talk with Tracy but am still concerned about the staff being left out in future university correspondence. There is no way that staff could have known that this was geared to that specific audience. Tracy and I spoke about how staff typically get upset when being asked to be a part of a campaign when they do not make large salaries. So, this is a hard thing to get right. But bottom line, staff have to be included and they need to feel a part of this wonderful university that we work at. When I took this role of President it was to support and stand behind our staff here at Virginia Tech. I would not be doing my job if I let things like this go.

The compensation committee that I am on reviewing student wage, and non-student wage positions is moving along nicely. With the help of extensive data and great conversations we have made great progress. I believe this committee will be able to put forth some recommendations in the next month or two. This committee is being chaired by Paula Stuard, Compensation Director in Human Resources and I am fortunate to have a seat on it.

I am a resource for this university advocating for staff, working beside our faculty, undergraduate and graduate student constituent leaders. I welcome encouragement and input on how we can work together to make our university stronger and work towards meeting the goals of our strategic plan.