

President's BOV Open Session Remarks – March 25, 2025

I'd like to begin my remarks by paying tribute to John Casteen III who passed away last week. Dr. Casteen was a former Virginia Secretary of Education and led the University of Virginia for two decades, a period of remarkable advancement for the university. While his transformational contributions to UVA are widely known and celebrated, he was also a great friend of Virginia Tech. Dr. Casteen was a persuasive advocate for our admission to the ACC. He was instrumental in the development of the joint VT/UVA graduate center at Falls Church, and he was a strong supporter of a joint VT/UVA biomedical center in Roanoke which evolved into the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC. I was fortunate to meet Dr. Casteen as I was coming to Virginia Tech. He knew that the Commonwealth would be stronger if we all worked together. His passion for higher education, especially in Virginia, was inspiring to me. We will dearly miss this extraordinary person and leader.

This is a tumultuous time for higher education in the U.S., and Virginia Tech is not immune from any of the scrutiny around "DEI," indirect cost recovery of grants and contracts, immigration, free speech, academic freedom, or the impact of the downsizing of federal government on university programs and on the families of our students and employees.

I believe Virginia Tech's strength is rooted in our adherence to principles that provide a compass when we lose our way or when outside forces push us in a new direction. Those principles include our commitment to freedom of speech, academic freedom and our Principles of Community. We also committed to uphold the law when it comes to discrimination based on protected identities. The interpretation of those laws has shifted in recent years and months, and we must shift accordingly as we have with every new administration in Washington, particularly when it comes to Title IX. And while we could choose to engage in a prolonged legal fight over the current administration's interpretation of Title VI, the Equal Protection Clause and the Students for Fair Admissions decision, I believe there is another path for Virginia Tech that allows our institution to maintain its momentum in service to the Commonwealth and the world while remaining committed to InclusiveVT and our core principles, by making adjustments that accommodate the current interpretations of the law.

I am heartened by the Board's commitment as expressed in the first two paragraphs of the resolution:

"WHEREAS, VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE & STATE UNIVERSITY highly values diversity, including diversity of thought and experience, and fosters an inclusive

environment, encouraging a culture of opportunity for all, which immensely enriches our campus, and is committed to providing every student an education that is free from discrimination and grounded in merit; and

WHEREAS, VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE & STATE UNIVERSITY'S mission statement includes a commitment to "improving the quality of life and the human condition within the Commonwealth of Virginia and throughout the world;"

Making sure all students, employees and community members have access to the same resources and opportunities regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin and sex sounds simple, but it can be complex. We are reviewing our programs, several hundred of them, that touch on one or more of these protected classes. We have already made several significant changes and dozens of minor adjustments, but we have more work to do. As required by the resolution that passed today, I will report back to the Board of Visitors and to the university community, starting with a town Hall and listening session during the first week of April. I know that many university employees and students want to know what will change and what will not. As soon as we have clarity, we will share with the community. Please stay tuned.

Virginia Tech has been fully compliant with prior interpretations of the law and will continue to comply as the interpretation of existing laws changes or as new laws are passed. As the first paragraph of the resolution clearly states, what we cannot do is abandon our commitment to creating an inclusive environment that encourages diversity of thought and the diversity of human experiences that create the foundation for a wide range of perspectives. Without that richness of experience, we cannot fulfill our mission of preparing students for a successful and fulfilling life and ensuring that our research is deeply informed by the people we serve.

As a land-grant, we are also committed to access for students who might not have the income, generational wealth, or personal networks to attend college otherwise. The Virginia Tech Advantage represents our commitment to all students from Virginia to ensure that they have access to the full Virginia Tech experience, including those opportunities that create a bridge between college and a career. I am proud of what we have been able to achieve through a decade of InclusiveVT, with 20% growth in our undergraduate enrollment, especially among underrepresented and underserved students, during a period in which applications grew by 200%. That conundrum, 20% growth in enrollment during a period of 200% growth in applications, is a consequence of a lack of infrastructure on campus and in Town to support a larger student population. I am pleased that our Partnership for Progress initiative is bringing the university together with the Town of

Blacksburg, Town of Christiansburg, Montgomery County and the New River Valley Regional Commission to address this challenge and others. By the end of this academic year, we will have completed our work to develop a common vision for addressing our challenges and opportunities and will have identified actions to begin realizing that common vision. The campus housing resolution that passed today is not about restricting housing on campus – it is about ensuring that the Board and the administration have been diligent in considering - and reconsidering - all of the options to achieve affordable, high-quality housing that supports the academic and social success of our on-campus student population. I welcome that debate and the creative solutions that will result.

A second distinguishing characteristic of land-grant universities is our commitment to engagement with the communities we serve. It is that commitment that has served Virginia Tech well for over 100 years. We need to do even more. That is why we are activating the Virginia Tech Innovation Network, modeled on our eleven Agricultural Research and Extension Centers. These ARECs are distributed around the commonwealth. They are based on research that is thematically aligned with the needs of the communities they serve.

On an even grander scale, we now have Academic Building One in Alexandria focused on the tech ecosystem in Northern Virginia, the National Security Institute, a portion of which is embedded among a concentration of partners in Arlington, our VTC Health Sciences and Technology campus in Roanoke with our major clinical partner Carilion Clinic, and budding enterprises such as our FBRI pediatric oncology unit in DC with partner Children's National Hospital, and the recently announced Coalition for Smart Construction in Falls Church, located among a concentration of design, contracting and construction firms including Hitt Contracting. In addition, we have dozens of other smaller units and offices embedded in every county and city in the Commonwealth. Connecting these nodes in our innovation network to each other and to our main campus in Blacksburg promises to elevate the impact of Virginia Tech research by leveraging partnerships and being present and engaged where those we serve live and work, in the spirit of *Ut Prosim*. Furthermore, our Global Distinction initiative is designed to connect the best talent and partners anywhere in the world to Virginia. It is this deep engagement that is the solution to the primary challenge facing higher education, and that is lack of public trust.

When we were faced with the pandemic almost exactly five years ago, our mantra was to emerge from the pandemic a stronger institution. We did – in almost every measure. We now face what could be another existential challenge that is rooted in a lack of public trust in higher education. We must adopt the same mindset that got us through the last crisis – we will emerge stronger.

Thank you - and Go Hokies!

Tim Sands