

Paolo Fermin

Undergraduate Representative to the Board of Visitors

August 2021

Undergraduate Constituent Report

Good afternoon members and constituents of the Board. It is a great honor to serve as the undergrad representative this year, and allow me to quickly introduce myself before we dive into things. I am a senior studying Computer Engineering, and I live in Alexandria, VA. I have served as an RA in the Honors Residential Commons at East AJ, a member on the Student Life Council, and also worked on various undergraduate research projects with the Hume Center and the FASER lab. I hope to provide the student perspective to you all throughout the year as best as I can. It is even more special to hold this position during this historic sesquicentennial year, and hopefully, I'll learn how to pronounce it by the end.

At this time last year, some students hadn't even fully unpacked their belongings in their residence halls, because they were expecting to be sent back home before the month was out. In stark contrast, the mood on campus this year is quite hopeful. One of the biggest reasons that students fall in love with Virginia Tech is the community, and I feel that it's back and stronger than ever. Once again students can randomly bump into a friend in the classroom or walking across the Drillfield, and often you haven't seen each other in over a year. New friends are being made simply by being around other students again, connections that could never have been made in an awkward Zoom breakout room that we've gotten too used to. Huge tour groups led by Hokie Ambassadors walking backward seem to have only gotten bigger, and even the iconic electric scooters that were a pre-pandemic hit have made a comeback. By far the biggest factor in students being comfortable with this return to normalcy is the university's strict COVID policies, requiring every student taking in-person classes to show proof of vaccination, or submit to regular COVID testing. I would like to be absolutely clear that students are largely in favor of these policies, as shown by the 94% vaccination rate recently publicized in the VTNews. These numbers are certainly something to be proud of, and I thank the Board and administration on behalf of students for taking a strong stance when it comes to vaccination.

Mask usage among students has also been high – most of the time, those seen inside not wearing a mask are quickly reprimanded by a faculty, not to mention the dirty looks they'll get

from their peers before then. However, as soon as you step outside, the mask policies become a free for all. The university itself has hosted events such as the Welcome Week concert and the Hokie Hi picnic, where thousands of students gather in proximity outdoors, with few masks in sight. This disparity between indoor and outdoor mask usage has led to some confusion amongst students, who have expressed this to me via conversations and social media. I recognize that this puts decision makers in a tough spot. On one hand, students are dying for a return to normalcy (not to mention the upcoming football games), and these big events have been great for introducing the freshman and sophomore classes to Hokie traditions that they have missed out on. On the other hand, the Delta variant is still a concern for many. The solution is not clear, and I hope that university leadership can work together with students to provide more communication and guidance on this issue.

It is truly a testament to Virginia Tech's reputation that we received a record-breaking number of applications for the incoming Class of 2025, with just under 7,000 new students accepting offers. Students are eager to be back on campus and fully immerse themselves in the Hokie experience. Yet a population of about 30,000 undergrads flocking back to Blacksburg has presented a challenge for some of our infrastructure. For off-campus students to return, they must navigate around a maze of construction sites, only to find that the very same construction has eaten up some of the available parking space. On-campus students must schedule around packed dining halls, with wait times upwards of an hour at peak times. As our numbers continue to grow, students would love to see continued investment in infrastructure that is front-facing to the daily student experience.

I would lastly like to mention the new Undergraduate Student Senate or USS. The USS transition team has worked tirelessly over the summer creating a constitution, bylaws, and an election code, all to build a new model for student governance. With the lessons learned from the former Student Government Association, the USS is designed systemically with accountability, diversity, and clarity in mind. I would like to thank the administration, especially the Student Affairs office, for their support has had an "incalculable impact" on this process – that's a direct quote from the transition team. Through this year, I will work together with the USS as it will provide an outstanding new avenue for undergraduates to make their voices heard.

Once again, I'd like to thank the Board and administration for navigating us through these past three difficult semesters, and now it is a fresh start. This palpable sense of energy and

optimism on campus presents a great opportunity for university leaders. I hope to work closely with students, administration, and the Board this year so that Virginia Tech can once again demonstrate what it means we say that "This is Home."

Report from the Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors Phil Miskovic

Delivered at the August 2021 Meeting

Good morning/afternoon Rector Long, Vice Rector Baine, members of the Board, President Sands, and other guests.

I want to begin by thanking you for entrusting me with this appointment. The honor of serving my fellow graduate and professional students during this year, at a convergence of two historic events for our University, is certainly not lost on me.

As we begin our sesquicentennial festivities, we also break ground on the Innovation Campus next month. This new facility further extends our already strong graduate student presence in the northern Virginia area, where, as you know, [we've had graduate education for over 50 years.](#)

The celebrations of our 150th anniversary coincide with laying the foundation for our next 150 years. The speeches basically write themselves.

But it's within that same theme of the past meeting the future that I frame my remarks for you today.

In preparing for my new role, I looked back at some of the initiatives undertaken by my predecessors.

One of Tara Reel's focuses was on the physical space, ensuring graduate and professional students had adequate facilities. Zo Amani emphasized the differences between undergraduate and graduate students. Ryan King advocated for services at our extended campuses. Sabrina Sturgeon sought increased diversity and inclusion, as well as open communication.

Virginia Tech has made great strides in addressing some of these issues, but there's always more work that can be done. Issues that have been the focus of past discussions continue to perpetuate. For example, this summer, Graduate and Professional Student Senate President Jack Leff, Amanda Burroughs, and other graduate students organized 14 listening sessions across the 9 colleges. Students were given an opportunity to voice their concerns about any issues they had, though several themes formed:

- There's an unhappiness with compensation for graduate assistants, and a particular concern for international students for can't seek outside employment over the summer

- Related is an increasing cost of living, especially in the Blacksburg and northern Virginia areas
- Parking issues were the most frequent response and where many students focused their frustration
- There's also a concern about fees—not necessarily that they're too high (though they could always be lower), but rather concern surrounding communication around fees: how they're determined, how they're used, and so on. Students would also like to engage in conversations regarding late fees and penalties, perhaps allowing for grace periods or more forgiving processes for waiving late fees administratively.

I look forward to working with the administration, the GPSS, and my fellow graduate and professional students on continuing this foundational work started long before me.

Simultaneously, my goal is to set up a structure for readily identifying graduate and professional student concerns and a process for prioritizing the most pressing needs.

The inspiration for this concept comes from the last board meeting. Allow me to get a bit theoretical for a moment. Board members will recall Dr. Sui's presentation on the four frontier areas of future research. One such area was Whole Health—changing the paradigm from a focus on disease and symptoms to one of whole health, integrating intersections of animal, environment, and human health and building in communities and systems to empower multifaceted well-being.

What that basically means is all aspects of society are linked—natural and built environment, systems and policies, and so on. All contribute to a societal homeostasis.

If we take this macro concept and apply it to the individual level, we can better understand the need to focus on the “whole health” of the graduate and professional student. Academic, mental, physical, financial, social, and spiritual health all work together to contribute to the individual student's homeostasis.

From there we can take those broad categories and form a grid with grad student's most pressing needs, not unlike the Enterprise Risk Management prioritization from last meeting. I envision a sort-of living dashboard updated with various data as it becomes available. Data would come from sources as formal as the [Report of the Graduate Education Task Force](#) from last year; the [Mental Health Task Force Report](#) from 2019; and the [Food Access and Security Study](#); or sources as informal as surveys or less-formal studies by the GPSS. All of these would combine to form a single, common understanding of the graduate experience.

My overall objective is to create a sustainable system where we all work collaboratively to continue to build upon past work, always moving further and further into the future.

In closing, I would be remiss if I did not mention and personally thank Dean Karen DePauw for her many years of dedicated service to the graduate school, and to graduate students especially. Dean DePauw's commitment to the health and well-being of graduate students has been extraordinary. We'll miss seeing her, and I personally would like to wish her a happy retirement, and I look forward to getting to know and working with the new Dean of the Graduate School, Aimee Surprenant.

Thank you.

Attachments:

Executive Summary of the Report of the Graduate Education Task Force

Phil Miskovic Background/Bio

Report of the Graduate Education Task Force (GETF)

Executive Summary

Virginia Tech is a strong university with excellent opportunities for graduate education, and is among the leaders in land grant universities in the United States, with our crucial missions of teaching, scholarship, and outreach to our communities. Our trajectory has been upward, with our global university ranking recently rising substantially to the 201-250 band (from 251-300). Looking to the future, VT leadership has publicly announced strong ambitions, including our aspiration to be among the top 100 global universities. This ambition is not without relevant precedent; as noted elsewhere in the report, land grant universities from states with comparable populations and gross domestic products, like Purdue (88), Penn State (78), and Michigan State (84), are already among the top 100 global universities. There is, however, much work to be done for VT to perform in the area of graduate education at the levels of the land grant universities ahead of us in world rankings, and we have significant opportunity to improve upon the real, important, existing strengths in the quality of VT graduate education.

VT lags its aspirational peers (throughout the report, we refer to the fourteen land grant universities that are ranked higher than VT in the global rankings, as well as nearby North Carolina St. U., as our “aspirational peers” in key performance criteria for graduate education). We have one of the smallest overall enrollments of the group, and we have **full time graduate student enrollment that is only 55% of the average of those aspirational peers** (trailing that average by fully 4000 full time graduate students). Graduate enrollment per tenured and tenure track faculty member (TTF) lags the average of our aspirational peers by approximately 1.4 graduate students (3.2 per TTF for VT vs. 4.6 peer average). Effective mentoring of graduate students of course requires faculty mentors; yet, particularly in the science departments (defined broadly across several colleges), VT tends to trail most of our aspirational peers in both TTF faculty members and TTF faculty members normalized by total enrollment. External funding, so crucial to graduate education and research, and a very significant limiter on graduate enrollment, was fully 47% lower than the average of our aspirational peers (VT \$297M, peer average \$564M) in 2017. Since historically a significant proportion of VT external funding has come to the VT Transportation Institute, the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute, and the Biocomplexity Institute (the first two do not tend to fund many graduate students, and the research of the former Biocomplexity Institute has a decreased footprint), VT external funding for graduate education and research could actually be less than suggested by the 2017 numbers. Graduate enrollments at VT have declined in recent years, while graduate enrollments at our aspirational peer institutions have increased. It is equally worrying that both VT graduate applications and yield have declined, while those at our aspirational peers have increased. Some of the enrollment issues can be assigned to specific causes, and the vast majority of the decline has been in master’s programs. Declines in master’s of education program enrollments have continued over a long time span, believed to have been driven mostly by changes in teacher certification requirements. Declines in business master’s degrees may have resulted from discontinuation of the full time MBA program in Blacksburg. Yet at VT the level of PhD program enrollment has been stagnant as well, and some programs have experienced declines.

The GETF constructed hypotheses to explain these data, and considered approaches to improving enrollment in graduate education. Funding is essential to successful graduate programs. We noted that many other aspirational peers have far more robust programs to assist incoming and enrolled graduate students in crafting student-initiated funding proposals. In fact, in some respects the environment at VT not only fails to support such energetic students, but is punitive. Students who get a fellowship proposal funded, for example by the National Science Foundation, may receive a stipend that is lower than the VT average stipend for their program, and/or they may not receive funding for health insurance. We propose a mechanism herein that **encourages and supports student-initiated funding proposals, and ensures that students who succeed will be advantaged, not disadvantaged**. Currently, there are relatively few endowed graduate fellowships at VT. We contend that the level of bequest or giving to endow a graduate fellowship eternally is within the financial means of far more alumni and other potential VT supporters than, e.g., funding a building. We believe that graduate fellowship endowment targets should be set and potential donors approached such that we **substantially grow the number of endowed graduate fellowships at VT**. Many of our aspirational peers

provide a version of candidacy status for graduate students who have passed their preliminary exams, are now PhD candidates, and who are focusing on research. The funding that will be freed up by candidacy status will ease the financial burden on students, and make external funding go further in supporting VT graduate research. **We propose herein a mechanism by which the resolution to create candidacy status at VT, passed by University Council, can be implemented in such a way as to provide these benefits and yet be less costly to the university.**

In order to enhance the success rate of VT faculty in obtaining external funding, we surveyed faculty and office of sponsored programs (OSP) personnel at our aspirational peer universities to get a picture of how they are supported in creating research proposals. The survey reveals that VT faculty get a comparable amount of support to that available at our aspirational peers, but that there are **best practices for support in crafting proposals that the GETF hopes will be adopted at VT**. These include more assistance in preparing forms for which the data can be extracted directly from OSP databases, further experimentation on placing some OSP personnel out in the colleges where they can interact more with proposal writers, and consideration of the possibility that OSP personnel in the colleges develop specific expertise and strong contacts with a funding agency of special pertinence to that college, acting as a conduit so that VT can extend its knowledge of upcoming opportunities, and even influence the nature of upcoming opportunities.

To directly address the issue of recruiting success, the GETF recognizes the energy, expertise, and creativity of departments, and their essential role in the graduate recruiting process. We also recognize the value of a coordinating body; one which can create dashboards, university communications that are customizable to departments to keep up frequent contact with recruiting targets, help with constructing strategies tailored to characteristics of groups of similar departments, and bring together program and department recruiting experts to share and promulgate best practices. **We recommend a hybrid model, which has also been called a “central coordination, local deployment” model, to improve VT graduate recruiting.** The Graduate School can play a strong role in this new model, and can also play a much stronger role in periodic program evaluation. A capable and neutral entity like the Graduate School can substantially improve graduate program assessment and review, promoting a culture of learning from one another, and constant improvement. We also note that the graduate student stipends that many of our programs offer fall well below those of our aspirational peers and that this likely has a negative impact on our ability to recruit top students.

With regard to the quality of VT graduate education, our students tell us that they greatly appreciate the outstanding sense of community that is fostered here for graduate students; overall, they have many positive things to say about the quality of the VT graduate education experience. At the same time, there are areas for improvement as well. Quality and cost of housing for graduate students is a continuing issue; there may be opportunities for VT to work more closely with apartment owners and community leaders to raise expectations and improve availability. Mentorship is a crucial aspect of the interactions between faculty, particularly chairs of graduate committees, and graduate students. Most new faculty members have had no formal training in running a research group, supervising students, dealing with problems that arise, managing a research budget, and other aspects of successful mentorship. **We propose herein that new VT TTF faculty members should all participate in mentorship training, using effective and proven methodology.** There are many other aspects of professional training that are highly beneficial to graduate students, preparing them to move on to virtually any imaginable career; effective oral and written communication, team leadership and working effectively on teams, basic statistics, and a number of other professional skills. **The GETF recommends organization of VT professional training opportunities in a Graduate Certificate to increase awareness and ultimately achievement for our graduate students.** Effective mentorship training for young faculty and professional development of our graduate students will thrust VT into a leadership position among land grant universities in these respects, and will make VT students exceptionally well-prepared for their professional careers.

We give here abbreviated versions of the key GETF recommendations; all recommendations are elaborated within the appropriate, subsequent report section. We Recommend that VT:

1. Provide to graduate students resources to support enhanced numbers of student-initiated research proposals.
2. Make a focused effort to solicit donations for endowed graduate fellowships.
3. Increase the number and scope of self-funded graduate programs.
4. Implement a modified version of the Candidacy Status resolution passed by the University Council in spring 2019.
5. Expand mentorship training to include all new assistant professors.
6. Implement 360° feedback for tenure-track faculty (TTF).
7. Implement a Professional Development Graduate Certificate.
8. Increase the minimum assistantship stipend rate to match the minimum rates of Virginia Tech's aspirational peers..
9. Annually compare graduate stipend rates to our peers, and create incentives for colleges to maintain competitive rates.
10. Develop standard phrasing to properly convey intentions to employ graduate students for multiple years.
11. Enhance Office of Sponsored Programs support to faculty preparing research funding proposals.
12. Co-locate OSP staff in colleges and enhance agency-specific expertise and relationships.
13. Adopt a hybrid model where the Graduate School assists departments and programs to improve graduate recruiting.
14. Enhance the role of the Graduate School in graduate program review and evaluation for continuous improvement.

Phil Miskovic Background



Phil Miskovic is a PhD student in the Center for Administration and Policy (CPAP), focusing his research on local government. He is also completing a Master of Public Health (MPH) with concentrations in both Public Health Education and Infectious Disease.

Phil splits his time between Blacksburg and Crewe—a town of about 2,300 population in rural Nottoway County, about three hour's drive from the main campus—where he serves as that town's mayor. He says his motivation comes from a desire “to bridge the gap between theory and practice, especially in economically disadvantaged areas rich with strong communities and culture, but lacking in financial resources or the subject matter expertise of the modern public administrator.” His elected service began in 2012 with his first of four 2-year terms as a member of Crewe Town Council before being voted into his current role in the 2020 municipal election.

Phil has a Master's degree in Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness from Virginia Commonwealth University and a BA in Religion from Hampden-Sydney College. He also serves as a graduate assistant in public relations for the College of Architecture and Urban Studies and as the emergency planner for Virginia's Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS). Prior to his employment with DBHDS, Phil was a policy analyst for Virginia's Secretary of Public Safety in the administration of then-Governor Bob McDonnell.

Phil also serves on the Board of Directors of the Virginia Municipal League. In 2019 he was the first recipient of the Emerging Leader Award by the Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership. In his free time, Phil enjoys cooking, traveling, and home renovations. His Crewe home is a century-old historic Catholic Church he purchased and painstakingly repurposed for its current use.

November Constituent Report

Paolo Fermin, Undergraduate Representative to the Board of Visitors

At our last meeting, I shared students' broad sense of optimism about the return to in-person campus life. Now, in November, I'm disheartened to share that campus safety is a major source of anxiety for many students.

The biggest safety concern in the past few months is sexual violence, a term which I will use to refer to sexual harassment and sexual assault. This issue comes up consistently when speaking with student leaders. As early as September, hundreds of students protested on the steps of Burruss Hall, calling for greater accountability and support for survivors. Many student leaders in our inaugural Undergraduate Student Senate, including our President, ran on the platform of addressing these issues. Clery alerts about incidents at university-sponsored events such as football games and concerts make students wary of participating in these traditions. In my conversations with Resident Advisors, I've learned that their students are afraid to go out at night, even to take the trash right outside their buildings.

The issue of sexual violence disproportionately affects underrepresented groups on campus. The 2020 Title IX Campus Climate Survey notes that women of color reported this to be a problem more than any other group. And leaders in the LGBTQ+ community say that sexual harassment has become "a plague" for their constituents over the past year. Women are told to avoid certain construction sites because the workers make uncomfortable advances towards them. Clearly, sexual violence has been on many student's minds.

Consider another safety issue - football games. Students see an immediate and strong response to safety concerns at the football games, in contrast to little communication regarding the response to sexual violence. Everyone is excited for the return to a packed Lane stadium, but the games this year have had many safety issues, including physical injuries, overcrowded entrances, and delayed EMT arrival. In response, the university sends emails soon after the game detailing comprehensive and actionable steps taken to address the safety issues in Lane. The communication regarding sexual violence is sparse, and students think that that nothing is being done about the issue.

That's far from the case. The university has taken real steps towards addressing sexual violence on campus. This includes more the doubling the size of the Title IX office, focusing on

diversity in new hires to the Women's Center, and starting a new working group to address sexual violence culture and climate. The creation of Policy 1026 to distinguish sexual harassment as distinct from discrimination is also a great stride. I don't mean to suggest that the university isn't doing anything, but the scale of the problem far outpaces the response so far. Thus, students struggle to see the positive outcomes they want, and receiving a new Clery Act email every week amplifies anxiety about this problem.

This is a complex issue, and it requires a complex response. To reduce student's anxieties, the university needs to make a greater effort to increase transparency and promote the work that is already being done. For example, including more student voices in working groups formed to address these issues. Or perhaps letting students know that an increase in Clery emails might reflect an increase in victims' confidence to report, and that is a good thing. Along with transparency, the capacity to solve this problem cannot be left up to a few committees or offices that are limited in their ability to reach a wide audience. Instead, there needs to be a coordinated effort from all aspects of the university, from the students, administration, campus police, and more. Title IX coordinator Katie Polidoro says that in an ideal world, there would be a whole new program or office focused upon *preventative* work, a centralized location that integrates all aspects of the university and has enough influence to affect real change. The students have an important role to play too, as these situations mainly involve students harming other students. We need communication and support from a unified location on how to participate in preventative efforts. Because offices like Title IX, the Women's Center, Cook Counseling, and others, exist for response rather than prevention.

As the Board of Visitors, you are the group who can elicit a broad, university-wide response to this. I urge the Board to consider the creation of a centralized office for preventative measures, commit to making actionable strategy to address this issue, and raise up the great work that is already being done. We need guidance and resources from the Board to create the cultural shift that is necessary to really tackle this.

This issue is part of a growing national conversation about sexual violence, especially within the current social climate. In the spirit of *Ut Prosim*, Virginia Tech can lead the way and be a model for peer institutions in our response. For us to truly say that "This is Home", we need to first prove to students that "This is Safe."

Phil Miskovic, Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors
Remarks to the Board
November 2021

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

I want to begin by thanking Rector Long for meeting with a small group graduate students over lunch a few weeks ago. They were all appreciative of the opportunity to discuss their issues and concerns with you. I would also like to extend an invitation to each member of the Board: if you would like to meet with groups of graduate students, in-person or virtually, on a specific issue or to listen to general concerns, please let me know. I'm more than happy to coordinate logistics for you.

You are all aware of the perpetual concerns graduate students face, from housing to compensation and more. Given the brief time I have allotted today, I want to focus on what I believe is a more complex issue, one that exacerbates all other concerns and, conversely if resolved, will help mitigate perpetual concerns. That issue is that graduate students have no sense of community.

What do I mean by community?

Broadly speaking, I mean an informal structure that takes our rich, diverse component parts and unifies and binds them under a common identity. The benefit to community is most apparent following disasters and crises.

For example, we can think back to the days, weeks, and months following the 2007 tragedy on our campus. While institutional mechanisms played a role in community recovery and resilience, much of what brought us from that dark period were the informal structures—the history, tradition, rituals, and beliefs that create a common Hokie Spirit. Despite the differences among us, there was a common thread that connected and supported all Hokies everywhere.

I begin with an extreme example, but the benefit of community can also be seen in individual crises. Mutual support networks serve as a safety net students can rely on, supplementing emergency resources and institutional mechanisms of support provided by the University. For example, graduate students can turn to both the broader community and Cook Counseling for emotional support when needed, rather than just the latter.

So why don't graduate students have a broader community?

One explanation I've heard is that it's just the nature of graduate education—whereas undergraduates have a more formal connection to the wider university, graduate students primarily live within their own department. Everything is self-contained within that department from day one until they earn their degree.

A second, related explanation is that the nature of academia perpetuates the silos departments build up and live within. In many instances, grant funding comes directly to faculty. When discussing university budget funds, departments compete with each other for their slice of the pie. Finally, faculty and their graduate assistants are laser-focus on their individual research, leaving little capacity for innovative interdisciplinary collaboration.

So how can we begin to address this issue and create a strong graduate community?

I would propose two broad solutions:

First, we need to shine our “beyond boundaries” spotlight internally. We need to continue to not only highlight and reward groups working across departments to bridge gaps, but we also need to expose institutional barriers to interdisciplinary collaboration. We need to break down the traditional silos of academia and make Virginia Tech a network of interrelated research and activity.

Second, we need to consider the presentations we hear and the decisions we make with a graduate student lens. For example, if we build a new student housing village, setting aside a large portion for graduate students to live and commune together would certainly help build community. The Innovation Campus will continue the long history of quality graduate education we have in northern Virginia, but student housing and community space would unite graduate Hokies in the region.

I believe creating a graduate community will strengthen our social capital across the university and increase our internal capacity. In turn, this will help mitigate all other perpetual concerns we as graduate students face.

Thank you.

Good afternoon members of the Board,

It's only been a few weeks since we last saw each other, whether it be at that outstanding sesquicentennial celebration or during commencement weekend. Only recently did I feel like I knew what I was doing as a BOV rep, and now it is sadly my last report to you.

While the position of Undergraduate Representative is singular, I have never felt alone in this work. I've got a whole team working with me through the Undergraduate Student Senate, especially our senate President Caroline, Vice Presidents, and senators, many of whom hold leadership positions in cultural organizations, class office, Greek life, and more. Our Senate has held Town Halls and discussions regarding sexual violence and mental health resources, which have informed my reports to you. USS has also provided a great avenue for information to flow from the Board back to the students. After each Board meeting, I presented an update to the Senate on highlights that affect the student body the most. Thus, students worked with administrators who were tackling issues such as sexual violence, the math emporium review, College of Architecture restructuring, international student experience, and others. I am excited to see what the future holds for the USS and proud that I was able to help during this first year.

I've had a chance to do outreach outside the university as well. I was able to travel to Richmond to meet with members of the General Assembly through a USS trip. I have also built a small but growing network of Board reps at universities across the Commonwealth, meeting with the reps from JMU, ODU, and UVA. We have shared best practices and challenges about the role, and highlighted what issues are unique to our respective universities.

Looking to the future, many changes are coming to the student experience next year, especially for incoming students. There will be a completely new model for on-campus living known as the Residential Well-Being Model. This system is meant to address the mental health issues that I have spoken to you about, through Cook counselors embedded within residence halls, integration of our award-winning Hokie Wellness programs, and changing what it means to be an RA (now "Residential Well-Being Leader"). Speaking as a former RA, this model seems like a good idea. I found that the most fulfilling part of the role is getting to know your residents and build a community, but often that was bogged down by menial work. Now, RAs will be able to specialize in what they are good at, and have more support from Student Affairs and Hokie Wellness regarding conduct cases, leadership development, and mental health. RAs are typically

the first responders during mental health crises, but a week of training does not compare to years of experience that new embedded counselors would provide. Since this is a completely new model, some within housing are worried that this all sounds good in theory, it may not work well in practice. Many details still need to be solidified before the start of next semester. Fortunately, there is an ongoing search for a new Director of Residential Well-Being, and I had a chance to meet with one of the candidates recently. If all the candidates are of equal caliber to that one, then I think we will be in good hands.

I spend so much time talking about this new model because along with it there are coming changes to new student orientation. There will be expanded opportunities for virtual engagement throughout the summer, and a longer period of “Weeks of Welcome” right before classes start. This extended orientation period, in combination with a timing closer to the start of classes, is superior to the old system where students crammed tons of information into two days in summer, most likely forgetting everything by the time they start. In addition, the Sexual Violence Culture and Climate Working Group has focused upon integrating sexual assault prevention work into the residence halls. The idea is to encourage bystander intervention, recognition of environmental factors, and increasing the dialogue around consent, alcohol use, and sexuality. This may be accomplished through the new RA training, as well as increasing the avenues for feedback about the culture. Once again, the residence hall is not the only place where sexual violence occurs, but it is a step in the right direction, and I look forward to the expansion of the working group’s scope come next fall.

With a new year comes goodbyes, and I want to recognize Frank Shushok, who will sadly be leaving us for Roanoke College. I’m sure everyone here has a story about Frank, but I would like to briefly share my own. We met in my freshman year after I received an Aspire! Award, and shared lunch at D2. I was intimidated at first, but Frank asked his trademark questions and I realized I could open up and be real with him, and administrators aren’t so scary after all. He invited me to join the Student Life Council, which kept me engaged with current university initiatives throughout my time at Tech. Years later, Frank encouraged me to apply for the BOV position and the rest is history. Frank saw the potential in and mentored so many students in his 13 years here, and he will be missed. Thankfully the office is in the good hands of Frances Keene in the meantime.

Finally, I would like to thank the Board for the opportunity of a lifetime. My favorite thing about this school is the Hokie community, and through this role I have had a chance to interact with more Hokies than I ever could have imagined, whether it be students, staff, faculty, and the Board. It has been a privilege to get a look behind the scenes at how this university works, and in a small way to shape it. It has been challenging and rewarding, and I have learned lessons that I will carry with me for a long time.

You haven't seen the last of me – I will see you all at the Sesquicentennial Celebrations happening over in Switzerland. Speaking of Switzerland, our incoming rep Jamal just got back from his study abroad there. His character and friendliness really shined through the interviews, despite being on a Zoom call with a six hour time difference. I hope you look forward to Jamal's term next year. Thank you.

Remarks to the Board of Visitors

June 2022

Phil Miskovic, Graduate Student Representative to the Board

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

Last week I was in a meeting with stakeholders in the National Capitol Region regarding the housing crisis in that area. As you may know, the University made the decision to close only university-operated student housing in the region last month. At a time when [housing in the US has become harder to afford](#), we've made the crisis worse for our students by removing 65 beds from our inventory before having a new housing solution in place. According to at least one faculty member, students are either dropping out or withdrawing their acceptance because we can't help them with housing.

Stakeholders compare the level of urgency in this situation with that seen in Blacksburg a few years ago, when we over-enrolled freshmen. Rather than saying to the incoming students, "sorry, but you'll have to find your own housing off campus", within a matter of months we had contracts in place and had converted multiple hotels into new dorms for the year. There was a high financial cost, but that cost was seen as preferable to the reputational cost that comes with the alternatives.

Let's talk about reputational cost. Virginia Tech enjoys a high reputation among alumni, prospective undergraduates, and within many graduate programs. We also have a reputation for being a "good value". A recent [article by Money.com](#) ranked the best colleges in America by value. According to their methodology, Virginia Tech was ranked 22nd out of 623 colleges and universities in the nation. We're 8th among our 25 peers. Pretty good.

But when you drill down into the raw data, you get a different picture. Specifically, our average price when factoring in grants is \$21,400, which drops us to 21st among our peers. Average price for low-income students is \$11,930, or 20th out of 26.

This begs the question, are we living up to our land grant mission if we are unaffordable for low-income communities? How does this impact our reputation?

Now let's assume affording to get in the front door isn't an issue. Are we still living up to our land grant mission if some programs are unaffordable for many? What does it say about our emphasis on diversity and inclusion if only students from higher-income families can study abroad, live within walking distance of the Blacksburg campus, or afford any housing in northern Virginia? How does this impact our reputation?

Based on the methodology used for the article, part of the reason we're ranked so high in "good value" is because of high early career earnings (we're in the top 50 at about \$73,000 average). But what about those who want to go into public service or [academia](#) or return home

to Southside or Southwest Virginia where they earn more modest salaries? Are we living up to our land grant mission if our graduates need to pursue private sector careers in economically strong communities in order to realize a return on their educational investment?

Of course, I can't talk about affordability without mentioning the possible increase to tuition and fees.

When we increase tuition and fees, even small amounts incrementally, we make Virginia Tech less and less accessible to some. One percent here, three percent there—it adds up over time. I have a niece or nephew due to be born in just a couple of weeks. Naturally, Uncle Phil is going to not-so-subtly encourage him or her to become a Hokie. But how much will a degree cost 18 years from now?

Are we and our staff in the budget office looking at tuition and fees primarily from a bottom-line, business perspective, or are we accounting for the human component and our land grant mission as well?

I understand all too well the challenges you face in weighing advice and recommendations from staff against the very real needs, concerns, and struggles of those financially impacted by your budgetary decisions. In fact, I believe I have the unfortunate distinction of being the only person in this room who has signed a tax increase into law. It's not an easy thing to do. Raising revenue by creating more financial stress for students and putting them further into debt—should be a last resort, taken only when we fully understand the data, have exhausted all other alternatives, and have plans in place to mitigate the impact on our most vulnerable students.

To the last point, I have a proposal: whenever staff proposes tuition or fee increases, the Board should be given a comprehensive analysis of the impact on students, broken down by demographic, and compared to our peer institutions. Funding should be automatically set aside to increase need-based aid so that there is no adverse impact to low-income students.

There is much, much more I'd like to say on this and the many other issues facing students but I'll have to leave that in the very capable hands of my successor, Anna Buhle. I also invite you to read the attachments to my report.

I want to end by thanking the Board for the opportunity to serve as your graduate student representative. It's been an amazing year getting to know each of you and the inner workings of the University. I've learned an incredible amount.

As a result of the exposure I've been given here, I've accepted a graduate assistant position with the Office of Student Affairs, working to mentor student leaders. I'm even adding higher education administration to the long list of possible career paths I'm considering post-graduation.

(As a side, I'll point out that Julian Burruss was appointed our 8th president while still working on his PhD).

I also want to take a moment to recognize some of the many people who often go unnoticed, those who work behind the scenes to make our meetings a success: Kari, Kim, Ellen, and others who keep me and Paolo on track. VTPD for their constant presence and professionalism. Facility and catering staffs. And the audio, visual, and other IT technicians who make our meetings seamless, even when we forget to speak into our microphones. Thank you for all you do for our university.

Finally, if you're ever in the historic Town of Crewe, be sure to look me up or at least stop by and visit our award-winning railroad museum.

Thank you.

Attachment 1: Top issues facing graduate students

Attachment 2: After Action Review

Attachment 1: Top issues facing graduate students

Graduate students are an inherently diverse constituency. Some come directly from undergrad and may still be supported by their parents. Others are farther removed from earlier education and completely independent. Still others are supporting their own families and may be working while trying to pursue a degree. Some have assistantships, many do not. They come from across Virginia, the United States, and the world to earn degrees that will take them into industry, academia (research and/or teaching), and public and non-profit sector careers.

The issues graduate students have are as diverse as their individual circumstances. Broadly speaking, these concerns are not unique to Virginia Tech; nor are they new concerns. They are complex, without easy solutions. When solutions are created to address issues, other related concerns arise. While we may never be able to fully solve these issues, we need to continue to keep them at the forefront of decision-making at all levels of the University.

Top issues (in no particular order):

1. **Affordability:** In order to be competitive among our peers and maintain a positive reputation as a desirable place to earn a graduate degree, we need to ensure Virginia Tech remains affordable. Directly related to affordability are:
 - a. Tuition and fees: are we living up to our land grant mission by remaining accessible to prospective students from low-income communities, or have our costs priced out those individuals? Can a student afford to return to Southside or Southwest Virginia after graduation to live and work, or must they live in more economically developed regions in order to earn a higher salary and realize a return on their educational investment?
 - b. Stipends: are the stipends we pay graduate students sufficient for cost of living? Do they reflect the value and cost-savings graduate students provide the University in terms of research, teaching, and other work?
 - c. Housing: are we engaging with traditional and non-traditional stakeholders on innovative solutions for the affordable housing crisis? Are we viewing the needs of graduate students with the same urgency as undergrads? Are we giving equitable attention to the diverse housing needs of each of our extended campuses?
2. **Mental health:** Especially in a post-COVID environment, mental health has become a key concern for graduate students. Work-life balance, affordability, and world events all contribute to the increased awareness of and need for mental health support.

While clinical services are required for some, other mental health support structures—like anonymous peer counseling, whereby students can call to talk to someone and/or vent their frustrations; and whereby peer counselors can connect callers with resources they may need—are lower-cost, community-based systems that can help a large portion of those in need.

3. **Community:** In some respects, graduate students lack a broad sense of community, the history, tradition, rituals, and beliefs that create a common “Hokie Spirit” from our diverse parts. The following paragraphs attempt to explain levels of community, where graduate community is lacking, and the benefits of working toward a stronger graduate community at all levels.

Description of Community

Let’s assume there are four levels of community for graduate students, shown in Figure 1 below: the Graduate School, Near Internal, Far Internal, and External. External factors influence community but can also be influenced by community

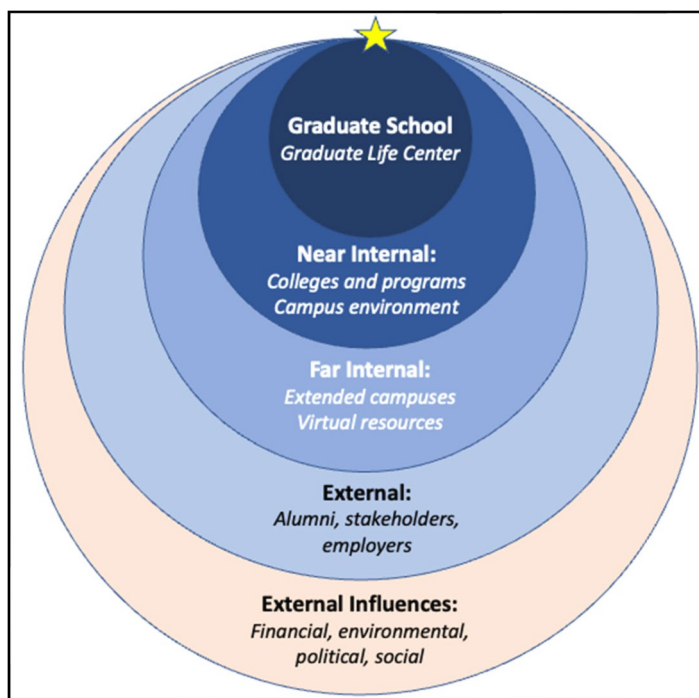


Figure 1: Levels of community

The first level, Graduate School primarily serves graduate students in need of services and ensures no student falls through the cracks. They offer a plethora of academic, financial, mental health, and quality of life resources, annual events, GLC space, and student representation. This level of community is strong, thanks to the hard work of Graduate School leadership and staff.

The second level, Near Internal, are all graduate students on the Blacksburg campus. These are University-level resources and services (primarily marketed to undergraduate students), as well as any resources and efforts within individual colleges and programs. Community at this level is hit-or-miss. Community-building efforts are disjointed and dependent on individual programs. There is no common unifying “Hokie” culture.

The third level, Far Internal, are students on extended campuses or those taking classes virtually. There are some resources available through Blacksburg campus and some through extended campuses. Some on those campuses perceive that their needs ignored (housing in

NCR, for example). Like Near Internal, community-building efforts at this level are disjointed and dependent on the individual campuses. This makes the campuses feel separate from University and not a part of one community.

The fourth level, External, refers to alumni, parents, friends of the University, donors, fans, employers, and other stakeholders. Engaging with this level of community comes primarily from Homecoming, sporting events, and fundraising solicitations, as well as branded merchandise. Here there's also significant, underutilized opportunity to connect graduate students with alumni in more substantive way through networking; and to tap into graduate alumni network for financial and other philanthropy.

External influences—policymakers, stakeholder organizations, competitors, and peer and aspirant universities—both impact community, but can also be impacted by community. For example, if external stakeholders (influential alumni, for example) and PT grad students in positions of power feel as part of an ongoing community, there's untapped opportunity to greatly influence the environment.

Benefits of a Stronger Community

- Communities form social networks, which serve as safety nets and informal insurance networks for community members
- Strong communities have strong social capital. Social capital can supplement and supplant limited resources
- Reciprocity is critical to communities at each level—individuals not only take from the community, but they are willing to give to the community, trusting that their gift will be reciprocated at some unknown point in the future
- Lifelong relationships are created through engagement with community. This is especially important for alumni engagement and fundraising

Attachment 2: After Action Review

As some of you know, my professional background is in emergency management. Part of the emergency management process is to conduct an After Action Review (AAR) following each event, identifying the strengths, areas for improvement, and an action plan moving forward. With that in mind, I've created a very brief "AAR" for my time in this position.

This document should not be seen as a criticism of any individual. In any organization, unwritten policies, processes, and "ways of doing business" develop over time for a variety of well-intentioned reasons. Also keep in mind that this evaluation was written from my own perspective, without collaboration (as AARs normally have), and may be missing critical context. Nevertheless, I include it with my final report.

Strengths

1. Openness of administration and senior staff

Throughout my experience, the administrators and staff I have worked have been exceptional when it comes to genuine concern for graduate students. When the Graduate or Undergrad Representatives come to the administration with concerns, administrators and staff do an excellent job of either working to resolve those concerns, or at least explaining the broader context of the situation. Stakeholder engagement is also positive in other ways, including planning new and exciting initiatives. Administration provides forums for open discussion of issues (the President's Advisory Group, for example), and everyone is quick to respond to inquiries for data and more information.

2. Openness and approachability of the Board

At any public college or university in Virginia, Board positions are part-time, voluntary, and generally filled with individuals very successful in their fields of work. Given this, it would not be surprising if Board members seemed aloof or otherwise disinterested in the concerns of students. This is not the case at Virginia Tech—our Board is composed of an incredible group of leaders who demonstrate genuine concern for the student experience and the issues we face. Every member I've worked with over the last year has been engaging, keenly interested in the issues students face, and has treated representatives like colleagues. This kind of collegiality is necessary for strong member-representative relationship and is something we do extraordinarily well.

3. Spirit of *Ut Prosim*

From Board members to administration to staff to stakeholders, everyone approaches the roles and issues from a perspective of how to best serve the Virginia Tech community, rather than themselves. This spirit of selfless service permeates all aspects

of our university. We may disagree on processes or details, but even in disagreement, we can trust that everyone involved has the common good foremost in mind.

Areas for improvement

1. Stakeholder engagement

As mentioned in the “strengths” section, administrators and staff are open, responsive, and engaging when issues are brought to them. But in other areas, stakeholder engagement on policy is less apparent, especially when dealing with fiscal matters. For example, at our November meeting, at the request of administration, the Board approved a mid-year 9.1% increase in rates on all major meal plans.

Meal plans are required for all students living on-campus—graduate or undergrad. The Code of Virginia requires public comment for any proposed increase in tuition or mandatory fees. However, though *required* for many students, meal plans are not considered *mandatory*; thus, no public comment period was required by Code, and none was offered.

Moreover, neither the undergrad nor graduate representatives to the Board were made aware of proposal until it was presented in committee. The process and proposal were entirely without involvement, engagement, or even awareness of those students directly impacted or their representatives.

The same criticisms can be leveled against the mostly opaque budget process that leaves out key stakeholders (i.e., students, those most impacted by tuition and fee decisions), until a single, state-mandated public comment period. Generally, this public comment period occurs after the majority of the legwork is done on the budget and feedback received is seen as unlikely to influence decisions.

As a public administration student and practitioner, I can attest that it is a much easier, more efficient process if we make decisions, present them to our constituencies, and make minor adjustments based on feedback. But as desirable as that may be for both bureaucracy and leadership, failing to engage stakeholders in the process from the onset misses the opportunity to understand different, external perspectives. We also lose out on any innovative alternatives that come from collaborative discussion.

2. Representative involvement

A significant amount of a student representative’s time is spent explaining to our constituencies what the Board of Visitors is and, subsequently, what our roles are. While annual representative recruitment efforts are beginning to yield more applicants (such as a nomination form included in this year’s process), lack of awareness likely still accounts for relatively low application rates. Lack of awareness also means fewer students come to us with concerns.

One approach to increased awareness of the positions is to increase presence of representatives at university events. This doesn’t mean Board events, donor receptions,

and other infrequent occasions; but rather the more frequent public-facing events involving senior administrators. If the event is (1) high-level; (2) public-facing; and (3) directly or indirectly impacts students, representatives should be made aware and involved. Examples include Homecoming activities and other festive events; facility openings and other milestone activities; and major public announcements. While the President is the face of Virginia Tech, representatives should have a ubiquitous secondary presence in the public-facing side of the University.

Having a constant student presence would not only increase awareness of the position, but also increase the symbolic nature of the role and highlight the University's emphasis on students.

3. Actively engage student representatives for information

Student representatives are given near total discretion in how they carry out their responsibilities. These representatives, who are traditionally appointed for a single one-year term, may not have a strong grasp on how to execute their role until their term is almost over.

Currently, providing the Board with situational awareness on the issues facing students is focused on the representatives bringing to the Board issues important to students. While this is important, it at least partially overlooks half of the Board-representative relationship potential: Board members seeking out specific information from representatives.

Student representatives are the Board's eyes and ears on campus. We have the ability to gather data and provide it to the Board. We can inquire about specific issues or concerns and provide the student perspective. For example, a discussion at a recent meeting focused on the Math Emporium. It would not be difficult for us to seek out and provide to the Board different student perspectives on the Math Emporium, if that data was requested in advance.

We are here to serve the Board, to provide information on the student perspective the Board deems critical. A formal system or process developed by the Board to request data gathering from representatives on issues seen as important to the Board would benefit both the Board and representatives as they develop relationships with Board members and learn the finer skills of representative leadership.

Proposed Action Plan

1. Engage stakeholders and/or their representatives in key policy process
 - a. Collaboration should be viewed as the default approach to all policy-making
 - b. Administration should create a collaborative element to the budget making process

- c. If an item is to be included on the Board's agenda of significant importance to students, administration should engage student representatives before the meeting
- 2. To increase community awareness of Student Representative positions, symbolic nature of the role, and highlight the University's emphasis on students, administration and staff should include Student Representatives in all events that are (1) high-level; (2) public-facing; and (3) directly or indirectly impacts students Include student representatives.
- 3. To take full advantage of the Board-representative relationship and to gain broader situational awareness early in decision-making, the Board should develop a formal system or process to request data gathering from representatives on issues seen as important to the Board or its members.