

Camellia Pastore
Undergraduate Representative
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
August 2020

The sentiment of the season is tension, and it is weighing on our undergraduates. Because of the pandemic and its effects, much of this revolves around the cost and value of Virginia Tech. Students understand that it is not realistic to expect tuition cuts -- however, we cannot help but feel the loss as so many campus resources are unavailable or altered. In the wake of diminishing in-person classes and the cancellation of so many Hokie traditions and social events, students are asking themselves, "why are they bringing us back?" The answer is an important one. Instead of simply replicating existing teaching methods or VT traditions, students are hoping to see technology used in new ways to further the exemplary level of teaching and uniquely personal culture that drew many of us to Tech in the first place. We are also hoping to see the university create new and exciting ways for students, and particularly freshmen, to make friends and find meaningful ways to get involved on campus.

The pandemic has hit the younger generation hardest in an emotional way. Many of us thrive off of large social gatherings, bouncing from place to place, and intimate conversations as we navigate the challenges of becoming an adult. It is not the instinct for undergraduates to return to campus only to stay in isolation, and I believe that the university needs to guide students towards safe ways to engage with others and meet new people, rather than wielding the threat of punishment over our heads. For many of us, we haven't seen our closest friends and significant others in six months -- it gets harder every day to stay inside and alone.

It's also important to remember that not all students have a family home to return to when the university goes virtual. These issues are less prevalent with undergraduates than graduate students, but they are no less important. I hope to see Virginia Tech continue to use its student emergency fund and other resources to help our students with food and housing insecurity and limited internet access.

As students, we understand that administrators can't magically read our minds and come up with exactly what we want. That's why we need to create many more opportunities for students to be involved in university decision-making and brainstorming processes. Too many announcements are made that leave our students wondering why the decision was made, who made it, and how come none of us were consulted.

When considering student involvement with the administration, it's important to think about which students we're reaching and which we're not: the majority of undergraduates at Tech go four years with only seeing administrators at orientation or graduation. Too often, administrators only interact with a select few students, giving them a distorted picture of the wide variety of student experiences. I have heard time and time again that students don't even know that they have representatives, or even worse, that they don't trust them. I understand the

irony of this, seeing as how I'm now one of those "select few" students who now has more than my fair share of influence, but I plan to counter that by inviting other students to join me. During the recent interviews for the AVP of Student Affairs, I was fortunate enough to be able to invite several of my peers who aren't as involved in students leadership to be a part of the process. Sabrina and I have also worked to expand our social media presence and create a two-way conversation with students about what happens in university governance.

To continue this effort, I hope to see administrators create opportunities for students to have their input heard and ideas implemented. These roles don't need to be all-encompassing--students are simply seeking to know that administrators are not creating a college experience without any input from college students. I think students would be very invested in playing a role in the specific areas of campus life that matter most to them, and the division of representation would also make student governance a more equitable place. Over the past few weeks, I have met with nearly every major student group that I could think of, and their observations and concerns span a wide range. These insights are invaluable as I seek to represent the undergraduate student body as accurately as possible, and I believe the administration would benefit from new perspectives as well.

This summer, inspired by a wave of Black Lives Matter protests and activism, undergraduates have been considering the role they play in their own communities. I know Virginia Tech understands this sentiment as well, and I would like to sincerely thank the Board for the recent approval of the renamed residence halls, now Hoge and Whitehurst Hall, as well as ongoing efforts to make our campus a more inclusive space.

While I am grateful, we must not forget that many of the real oppressions that occur on this campus happen behind the scenes. I recognize and applaud Virginia Tech for its genuine commitment to making the Hokie experience welcome for all, but I worry we're not doing enough. We need to be engaging our majority students and helping them understand the effect of their actions and words. We need to be educating our students to correct the misinformation or lack of information they may have learned from K-12 history classes. There is no easy fix for these sorts of nuanced behaviors, but the end result will be well worth the effort.

I'd like to end by saying a very heartfelt thank you to the Board for this opportunity of a lifetime. Virginia Tech has given so much to me, I hope that I can give at least a fraction of it back.

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The most dreaded question of the summer is "how are you doing?" How many of us can honestly say that we're doing well? If you can name an emotion, students are feeling it, and often all of them at once. Over the past six months, we have moved back in to live in our childhood bedrooms, or stayed in Blacksburg apartments and dorms while the rest of the town grew quiet. We have celebrated at picnics with carefully spaced out blankets. We have gone to virtual office hours, waited in virtual lines, and taken virtual exams while professors watched us through our laptop cameras. We have lost jobs and found new ones as cashiers or delivery drivers. We have had surprise birthday parties on Zoom. We have watched loved ones be taken to the hospital, and later attended virtual funerals.

One topic on everyone's minds as we begin the school year is student socialization and the potential for Virginia Tech to have a spike in COVID cases like so many of our peer universities. Let me make something clear: the majority of our undergraduates understand the severity of the virus and its implications for ourselves, our classmates, and our families. However, this pandemic has forced all of us to evaluate priorities and weigh options, and many students are realizing that it is no longer sustainable to put our mental and emotional needs at the bottom of the list. When we say "this is home," we mean it: being back in Blacksburg is a large part of that home, but so is our Virginia Tech community. Without going to class, getting involved with research or clubs, hanging around campus or downtown, or spending time with old and new friends, what is the Hokie experience?

I want to let you know that we need your help. Undergraduates would like to be a part of the reason why Tech stays open through Thanksgiving, but we need to be able to learn, grow, have fun, and be challenged like we are in normal semesters. It's on all of us -- students, faculty, staff, and the administration -- to create new ways to make this happen, rather than scaring our students until they stay in isolation. It's also on all of us to have empathy and support each other through this harrowing time that is already having a major impact on my generation.

When considering student involvement with the administration, it's important to think about which students we're reaching and which we're not. Too often, administrators only interact with a select few students, giving them a distorted picture of the student experience. Most of my friends cannot name a single administrator at this school (other than President Sands). Most of my friends don't know that there is a student body president, let alone three branches of student government. When we allow this disconnect to happen, we are letting our students believe that the administration doesn't see or value them. Everyone in this room knows that's not true, but getting rid of that image involves the administration reconsidering what it means to be

welcoming to students and creating many more spaces for student input to be involved in conversations around policy and budget.

Nobel prize-winning economist Edmund Phelps researches a topic called "mass flourishing." The idea is, when a nation's citizens are all involved in its innovation, creativity, and progress, the society and everyone in it does well. In context of Virginia Tech, what I'm trying to say is that the administration doesn't have to come up with all the answers. Our students are bright and dedicated and looking to help, and especially during this crisis, we need all the ideas we can get. In recent weeks, as I've Zoomed with student leaders from most major campus organizations, I've been overwhelmed by their willingness to collaborate on advocacy issues and interest in providing more ways for their constituents to have their voices heard. I hope that as the university continues to brainstorm unconventional ways to stay connected in and out of the classroom, students will be treated as a resource rather than an afterthought.

This summer, inspired by a wave of Black Lives Matter protests and activism, undergraduates have been considering the role they play in their own communities. I know Virginia Tech understands this sentiment as well, and I would like to sincerely thank the Board for the recent approval of the renamed residence halls.

However, we must not forget that many of the real oppressions that occur on this campus happen behind the scenes. Performative actions will not affect our Black students who move into their freshman dorm only to discover that their roommate supports the Confederacy. Nor will they affect our Black students who watch their white classmates choose to work alone rather than join a group with a student of a different skin color. Nor will they affect the students who stand outside of dining halls and hand out flyers for an "Anti-PC Halloween Party" where attendees are encouraged to dress as mocking versions of marginalized groups. These are not theoretical examples. They are real events that happened to people I care about in the past few years. I recognize and applaud Virginia Tech for its genuine commitment to making the Hokie experience welcome for all, but I worry we're not doing enough. There is no easy fix for these sorts of nuanced behaviors, but the end result will be well worth the effort.

To wrap up, I want to say that you all make me really proud to be a Hokie. The genuine commitment to our students and to bettering the university makes me certain that we are headed in the right direction. I am working to bring empathy, humility, and creativity to my work this year. I won't be the first or last representative with big ideas, and I have relied on the guidance and wisdom of the Board members, current and previous representatives, many administrators, and my friends and peers as I navigate advocacy in a time of uncertainty. I cannot wait to let more undergraduates see what I see, and I know that they will make you all even prouder to be a Hokie than you already are.

Helpful resources:

[Colleges are Getting Ready to Blame their Students](#)

[This Summer will Scar Young Americans for Life](#)

[Mass Flourishing: How Grassroots Innovation Created Jobs, Challenge, and Change](#)

[Dr. Paul Offit \(CNN Transcript\)](#)

Hello all. I want to start by extending my gratitude to the members of the Board of Visitors, the graduate school, and the graduate student population for entrusting me to be the graduate student representative to the Board of Visitors for the 20-21 academic year. In addition - I want to thank Dean DePauw, Maruf Hoque, Ellen Plummer, and my predecessor Ryan King, among others who have aided in swiftly transitioning me into this role during such volatile times.

I applied to be the Graduate Student Representative, because I hold an immense passion for university governance and a desire to uplift the student collegiate experience. I came with ideas I hoped to address and with the intention to always put the needs of my constituency, graduate students, before my own. As I come before you today, I hope to articulate those needs, which are amplified in the era of COVID-19. I will be articulating three points.

The first point that I wish to present is student's dissatisfaction with communication on behalf of the University. I approach this from the standpoint of my history as a communication studies scholar. Let me begin by saying, I appreciate my daily "Virginia Tech News" email and what I see come out of social media. I see student success stories and the most ground-breaking research to come from the intelligent minds of our Hokie community. It's truly inspiring. What I think students are missing is the feeling of a candid transmission of information that boasts humility - in other words, communication that acknowledges shortcomings and emphasizes reality, even when it is not pretty. This is especially important today. In times of crisis, people seek transparency and prompt communication from their leadership. Students report being notified of fee increases and jarring policy changes second-hand through social media like Twitter and Reddit before official University channels.

This has been a long-standing issue that frustrates students and perpetuates inefficiency. Perhaps what is needed is an assessment of current communication initiatives and how students perceive them? Perhaps a greater centralization of strategic communication? With media trends and expectations changing so rapidly, it is essential that we, as an institution, stay current and meet students where they are at to foster a community built on trust and respect. We are a massive enterprise with students across the state of Virginia and beyond who rely on effective strategic communication as they are navigating life choices and their education at large. An effective community is only as strong as its populace is informed.

The second point that I find important to shed light on is student concern over graduate student funding and means to perform their duties. With the fear of budget cuts at the forefront of everyone's mind, myself and my colleagues beg the question - "Will my funding or stipend be cut?" With Universities across the country returning to remote learning just weeks into the semester they are asking - "Will I have an assistantship or research to return to if we fall victim to the same course of action?" These are the questions being asked by the graduate students that are fortunate enough to have assistantships.

As decisions are being made and future budget cuts are considered I ask that you keep in mind how essential it is to not allow graduate students to bear this blow. By virtue of our positions,

many of us are dependent upon the university to sustain our opportunity at education and depend on our stipends to simply live. If I do not have an assistantship, I cannot continue my education at Virginia Tech. Consider the graduate student who resides at the Northern Virginia campus whose cost of living is nearly double what it costs to be a student in Blacksburg. Think of the graduate student supporting a family on a twenty thousand dollar per year stipend. Not to mention - graduate students have their stipends cut then the entire university research enterprise is going to come to a screeching halt.

Pragmatically, there has been a \$300/semester reduction in fees for students that live 50 miles away or have classes/research completely remote. All research credits are considered to be "in-person" even though advisors have allowed people not to come in. if this rule could be relaxed, more students could benefit from the fee reduction.

The final point that I hope to emphasize today is the current state of affairs for students living off-campus. It is no surprise that most graduate students reside off campus. A great deal of emphasis has been placed on creating a safe, well-prepared on-campus residency, but our off-campus students will bear the true brunt of the blow that COVID-19 will have. While on-campus students can expect enforced policy surrounding facial coverings, socially distanced programming, and requirement of testing upon arrival, our off-campus students do not have these luxuries or expectations. If we meet the same fate as UNC Chapel Hill and Notre Dame, off-campus residents will not have the opportunity to simply cancel their contract and move back "home".

I bring this up to frame the immense risk my constituency faces. This neglect in resources will heighten mental health concerns, risk student health, and place a financial burden on students who are already bridled with immense student debt. Policy and added reinforcement of guidelines will be necessary to keep this population safe, along with continued funding and programming to vital resources like Cook Counseling, Dean of Students, and Shiffert health. Regardless of remote or in-person learning, we must provide support to off-campus students in this trying time.

I want to conclude this report by stating once again, as my predecessors have before that we are not the same as undergraduate students. Our experience is differentiated and my predecessor articulated it best as, "Graduate students are more likely to be older, have spouses, dependents, and elder care responsibilities, and far more likely to not be in Blacksburg." Each of these are amplified by the threat of COVID-19 and as we are moving forward considering policy, funding, and safety, it would be heinous to neglect these facts.

Although my tone is critical, I am impressed with our response to opening and initiatives taken to ensure student safety at large. As I shared with a colleague recently, Virginia Tech is taking all the right action and as we move forward with hybrid in-person and remote learning. I am confident that the administration will continue doing everything in its power with the hope that we all have to retain a degree of normalcy through in-person experience.

I am eager to serve and learn in the coming year, representing the needs of the graduate student populace and to work collaboratively to find effective solutions to our trying dilemmas.

Outline:

- Corona
 - Proud
 - How the semester felt/is feeling
 - Switch to cold
 - Quality of academics
 - Hopes for spring
- d&i → international
 - Freshmen experience now
 - Making people feel welcome
 - Highlights a dominant culture on campus
 - The little things (oasis, etc.)
- Administrative support
 - Social media statistics
 - We are in a tough position
 - Covid: connecting to students
 -

I want to start by saying that it's wonderful to see you all in person, and I am so proud of and thrilled about how Virginia Tech and the local New River Valley community have handled the past several months. Though we did have a spike in cases at the beginning of that semester, the numbers have steadily gone down since then as students have learned how to navigate new forms of social and academic activity. At the last meeting, I spoke about needing to set students up for success, and you did just that. This has really been a collective effort and we wouldn't be at this point without the support from administrators who have approved in-person events, faculty who have had compassion for our situations, and staff who basically make everything happen at this school. Thank you to all of those groups for your empathy and resources, and of course a thank you also goes out to my fellow students, who have adapted all of our norms, held each other accountable, and used creativity to make the best of a tough situation.

For many of us, this has been the hardest semester of our lives. What I hear from students across the board is that mental health and academic performance have taken a dive. Students who have never missed a deadline aren't starting assignments until the night they are due; students who had a morning routine at McComas are finding it hard to get out of bed and go for a walk. On top of this, many virtual classes allow students to have video and audio off, leaving us feeling distanced from one of the only stable parts of our day. From the student perspective, it feels like our experience and opportunities are being chipped away at -- it is harder to make connections with professors and classmates, harder to stand out at a career fair, harder to get involved with clubs and try new things. I have received a barrage of emails from students asking when we'll receive the Credit/No Credit grading options, more flexibility with time off, or options for tuition reimbursement. I don't know what to tell them. Students understand that this

year will never be "normal" and that accommodations have to be made to keep our community safe, but there is a common thought among students that the administration keeps "taking" without understanding the impact on our lives.

Looking forward to the spring semester, I hope to see the university continue the positives that I mentioned above, but work to address the issues that left students struggling this semester. It is undebatable that the academic rigor has taken a dive, and many classes feel duller than ever while the work continues to pile up. All this without the same day-to-day human interactions that keep us sane and regular semester breaks that allow us to recharge with loved ones. I believe that we all have to work not just to replicate a typical semester in the virtual environment, but truly push ourselves to use these new resources to create an engaging learning experience and community space.

I would be remiss without pointing out that the pandemic and its effect on the student body has not been felt equally. It is hard enough to be a freshman at a large university without being in a global pandemic, but being an international student makes that experience exponentially harder. International freshmen have to overcome navigating the immigration and travel systems to get to the US, language barriers, a new culture, and making friends at a school where the majority of students are from the local area. Even the small details can feel isolating, such as not being able to get the food your family cooks at a dining hall or from a local restaurant. Many students who start at Tech already know who their friends are, what clubs they want to join, and how school traditions work. For those who don't have that prior knowledge, it can be easy to feel like an outsider. Now more than ever, Virginia Tech feels overwhelmingly homogenous in a way that serves as a constant reminder to students that they are in the minority.

For our international undergraduates who chose to remain abroad, they are being asked to continue attending classes, participating in meetings, and holding leadership positions on east coast time, which forces many of them to wake up throughout the night in order to continue their academic and career trajectory. While time difference issues are certainly not the fault of the university or any professor, I want to take this moment to really appreciate all that our international Hokies do everyday that can go unnoticed.

Though I am so excited by the progress Sabrina, myself, and other students have made so far, I remain frustrated with the lack of administrative support that I feel. Student leaders at this university have been working tirelessly to represent their constituents and push for policy with little to no results. I have heard this sentiment echoed across the university that we feel like the student opinion is only considered when it is convenient. Sometimes I'll see an update from VT News with an announcement of something that I've been asking for, and am left wondering if my ideas were used and never credited. Other times, I'll be asked for my opinion only to see the exact opposite decision be made with no explanation. Even worse is when the student body is handed decisions that impact our everyday lives knowing full well that no student voices had any say in the matter. I and every other student leader at this school are simply trying to be heard in

a way that is more than superficial. Virginia Tech is overflowing with dedicated administrators who excel at their jobs, and I would like to see much more direct support for student representatives and campus organizations who are working for the betterment of the whole university.

My dream is for the systems of student governance to be explained at orientation, so that all students attending Tech can understand who is standing up for them and how they can take advantage of or get involved with that process. Further, I would be thrilled to have more official university personnel or news channels and social media accounts help elevate the profiles and projects of student leaders. The pandemic has made making these connections infinitely more difficult, but it layers on an existing problem -- as representatives, we are being asked to leverage social media to reach the entire student body, connect with everyone from the newest Hokie freshmen up to the highest decision-makers at the university, identify issues and come up with creative yet impactful solutions that haven't been thought of yet, bring concepts from academic policy to keep on track with peer institutions, and finally, we have to execute all of our ideas on our own. There are so many people at the university that are more skilled in these areas than I am. I don't want to stand up here and speak on the same problems that you've been hearing about from representatives for years. That's why I'm asking for increased direct engagement with the issues and ideas that student leaders bring to the table, so that we can make tangible progress where it is needed

At the last meeting, I spoke on the concept of mass flourishing. Our whole community has demonstrated this in action through our commitment to the health and well-being of each other. However, this concept extends to shared governance and policy as well. The more people we involve with ideating and working for change, the richer the end result will be, and this applies for every constituent group. It's what makes us Hokies -- we do better together.

Good afternoon, everyone. This report is the culmination of ideas from faculty, staff, students, and colleagues, who without their support would not have made this possible.

Graduate Assistants in Programmatic, Teaching, and Research Roles

I am deeply concerned about graduate students being able to maintain work-life balance. Frequently, in addition to our academic obligations, graduate assistants have limited autonomy in our roles and cannot exercise choice in determining our work schedule or demands on our time. For example, in September the Division of Student Affairs directed that offices on campus host programming over Labor Day weekend to occupy the undergraduate body. This announcement was made *days* before Labor Day and effectively rendered graduate student's university sanctioned break void. For the Spring semester: Student Affairs has initiated a call to action that programmatic offices host 50% of their programs as in-person experiences. This 50% mandate forces graduate students to be present at in-person experiences, which places them at greater risk while the pandemic is in effect. One might argue that graduate assistants have a choice to work these roles and that if we are not comfortable with those expectations, that we can work elsewhere. I counter with that being an illusion of choice. The stakes are too high that make the choice of simply resigning unreasonable. Our educational funding is often tied to these positions. This illusion of choice extends to other student employees. like Resident Assistants who have their housing security dangling in the balance of being told, "they have a choice in working there or not"

The university's plan for spring semester includes a push to return to in-person instruction and five intermittently spaced one-day breaks rather than a full week off for spring break. Students who have lab work and teaching expectations will likely have to exercise these days to contribute to scholarship, research, and instruction preparation to adequately meet administrative, college, and federal deadlines. With the multitude of competing demands that graduate students must commit to, I compare these one-day breaks to a gasp for air whilst being pulled along a sweeping current – they provide momentary relief, but the overall threat remains. We must ensure that these breaks can be used by graduate students and that all of our competing demands and priorities do not undermine their purpose. What can we do to make sure graduate students are supported, treated fairly, and don't feel as though they are being exploited?

Diminished Quality of Education

My quality of education has declined; many students have shared with me a somber disappointment in the education they have received this semester. Students are expressing that they are not learning as much, stressed, and disengaged by the virtual classroom. One might respond that, "this was to be expected" or that "we are living in a pandemic, of course it's not going to be the same quality!". While these statements provide justification, they simultaneously dismiss accountability. I am grateful that the cost of tuition did not rise this academic year, but the record should note that the equivalent cost is for a faltering online education vs the experiential learning that we hoped for. I think that something should be done to either improve

the quality of online education or create more achievable metrics under a lower quality of education – simply put, inclusive pedagogy. At least until in-person education resumes in full.

I understand optional intensive training and preparation was provided to faculty and teaching assistants prior to the start of the semester. Perhaps we need more of this? We could allow students the opportunity to choose to be evaluated on the credit/no-credit grade modality like last Spring as opposed to the A-F model? We could extend course completion deadlines to ease the stress of student's negatively impacted by the lower quality of learning? Maybe a slight reduction or rebate in tuition rates for students in online only experiences? Now, I recognize each of these proposals comes with a "We can't do that because...". I urge you to **not** mire in the barriers, but to instead seek solutions. We can all agree; Virginia Tech was not meant to be experienced online. But if we have to experience it online, how can we improve the experiences of students and faculty?

Virginia Tech Communication

Communication continues to be a challenge. In reviewing previous student representative reports, it appears that this concern has been raised several times over the past two years. We have talked about how communication is too polished, poorly disseminated, and lacks centralization. In June 2018 undergraduate BoV Representative , Seyi Olusina highlighted that communication with students needs improvements. In June 2019, Rachel Iwicky spoke to the lack of transparency regarding communications. Madelynn Todd spoke to this issue at the August and November meetings last year and discussed a Student Leader Communications Workshop to begin to address the issues – that never happened. Camellia and I brought up communications three months ago. Camellia has worked tirelessly toward a collaborative relationship in leveraging Instagram to disseminate information on behalf of the University. This appears to be effective, indicating that communication team and student partnerships might be worth exploring, but I caution students bearing the load of university information dissemination. In my previous report, I proposed that an assessment project be performed to collect real data on where the communication problems lie. I submitted a survey proposal for this and met with our communications team – ultimately the project was abandoned. That is 6 times that a student representative has raised awareness to this issue.

To contextualize this issue, I will provide an example and can provide others upon request. The parking fiasco that happened this semester was defended by expressing to the campus community that it was part of the 5-year parking plan. This 5-year plan gave plenty of time to disseminate and prime students of the upcoming change, but instead was reported abruptly and two weeks later than the 5-year plan designated, no less. When students called the parking office, they were even given different information from what the website suggested when trying to buy a permit. Finally, even though this is on the 5-year plan, I as an involved student leader cannot find this plan on the website. This example highlights untimeliness, poor centralization of communication, and poor dissemination.

It appears we are operating on an "advancement model" of communication, which might be appropriate to external constituencies of the university who need to get a high-level overview

of what is going on at the university and one that frames us in an attractive light. Perhaps more attention could be paid to a model that shares necessary information with students, faculty, and staff? We, as members of Virginia Tech community, expect complex ideas and policies disseminated in digestible ways – the rationale behind decisions. We want to understand what is happening at our home – triumphs and defeats. We want information that does not appear sanitized. I am indifferent to whether these problems are addressed through a workshop, press briefings, partnerships, a consultation, or assessment – I simply want to see the problem addressed in a successful way so that the next student representatives do not need to raise the issue. This issue has come to a boiling point, what will be done to remedy this?

Conclusion

I want to conclude by asking, how will you, as Board of Visitor members execute your authority to remedy student representative concerns voiced today and in the future? My over-arching request is that the experiences and needs of graduate and professional students be attended to more intentionally by faculty and administrators. I come to you hopeful that we can pursue changes to how we are operating based on the observations of the student body. Thank you for this time.

Camellia Pastore
Undergraduate Representative

March 2021 Constituent Report

Spring of my freshman year, I sat down on the first day of class next to someone that looked friendly. We started chatting, he asked about my week, and I mentioned that I had recently been to Souvlaki's. "What's that?" he said.

"What is *Souvlaki's*? The falafel place? THE falafel place?" I couldn't believe he hadn't heard of it.

I have had this moment, or versions of it, countless times throughout my college career at Tech -- proud laughter while describing the feeling of a Lane Stadium football game, or the instant embarrassment of not getting a reference to an infamous part of town. In recent months, I've been thinking a lot about these moments. Why did I feel the need to act as though my version of Virginia Tech was the only correct one? Why did I feel so inadequate when others knew things about the university or local culture that I didn't?

Logically, at a school of 30,000+ students, there are people and communities that make all of us feel welcome. There are more than enough open office hours and research positions to get us those stellar resume highlights and letters of recommendation. But not all of us actually experience that. It's not from lack of effort or resources from the administration -- sure, we should always be striving for improvement, but I have seen firsthand the effort and genuine enthusiasm for the student body that makes this school consistently on the list of happiest campuses. Thus far in my term as undergraduate representative, I've come to understand that often, the biggest barrier for students is simply not knowing what is available to them and therefore not being in the right place to reap the biggest benefits from higher education.

A recent article from the *Atlantic* discussed why students, parents, and politicians alike were so willing to push for an in-person return to university -- in other words, what this thing is that we call the "college experience."² It is an education, but not just in an academic sense. It is why we miss college so much right now, even though we're still enrolled in a full semester's worth of classes. It is through this out-of-classroom experience that we gain cultural competence, professional networking skills, how to sign a lease, the strength to handle mistakes, and so much more. This leads me to two main questions:

What is at the core of this mythical experience, and how can we steer students towards it?

Community. Opportunity. Exploration. I won't go into the specifics of these because all of you work everyday to make these goals a reality and could definitely explain them better than me. What I am most interested in is the issue of students needing guidance and not getting the direction they need. For instance, if students typically form stronger bonds and get the chance to learn more about their own values in Living Learning Communities (LLC), perhaps there are similar tactics we can use in other residence halls so that students who chose a less niche housing option can still have those same opportunities. On the flip side, more efforts could also be made

to ensure that students in LLC's get to meet others with differing perspectives or interests from theirs, so that they can get outside of their comfort zone and learn to communicate with a variety of people.

One metric of a student's success in college is their life after graduation. Well-being and contentment are much more than a career path, but a good salary, a large network of contacts, and a sense of purpose sets a strong foundation. In recent conversations I've had, undergraduates have expressed anxiety as companies shrink their number of hires and graduate programs take the year off from accepting students. On the national scale, 85% of college freshmen reported that getting a job was among the main reasons they attended school, but only 34% said they felt ready to navigate the job market by graduation.^{3,7} Further, 40% of students graduate and end up in jobs that don't even require a bachelor's degree.¹⁰ For many undergraduates, it can feel like you are missing some family connection or industry secret as you watch your classmates end up in dream positions with seemingly no effort. Other universities have also reported this issue of students not fully utilizing help from the career center, so I believe there are a number of practical tweaks we could make to help students feel fully informed and empowered to make an impact in the workplace.

What happens if a student's experience doesn't go according to plan?

Coming into college, a place where the social pressure can feel intense, there are a lot of ways to feel like an outsider. This is why it is so vital to showcase the many ways that our students can be Hokies and live out the *Ut Prosim* motto without having to adapt to an overarching culture. The value that Virginia Tech brings to its students and the world goes far beyond football games, amazing chocolate milk, and studying on the Drillfield. The reason that Virginia Tech is so valuable is that there are so many interests, academic advancements, and ways of being that come together at this school. Of course, we must go beyond that and continue to back up words with demonstrable actions. However, the effect of simply seeing your lived experience acknowledged and validated cannot be overstated. To see evidence that other Hokies are being celebrated for their unique accomplishments. To see that those same students have struggled with academics or mental health and aren't afraid to admit when times get tough. To see the racism or other systemic injustices perpetrated against your community be discussed openly. These are the sorts of actions that win over students that weren't convinced that Virginia Tech could be "home" for them.

Finally, we have to continue striving to eliminate or diminish barriers that can hinder students from fully realizing their potential in college. As tuition is the forefront topic of this meeting, I wanted to address that and add a bit of undergraduate perspective to the conversation. The way I see it, if the university would like to raise tuition slightly, then the university also needs to commit to raising wage positions, graduate student assistantships, and other student roles by the same percentage. If not, we are quite literally making it less feasible for a student to afford their education. I know that there are already conversations in the works related to salary issues, particularly for faculty and staff, but I would just like to urge you all to not leave

undergraduates out of that conversation. Financial difficulties may seem less common or look a bit different for undergraduate students, but those problems are still very much present and deserve our attention and support.

I wanted to end with another story -- I recently received a text message from a friend that I felt would be greatly appreciated by everyone here today. For context, she's talking about a classmate of hers: "[his] whole family of Hokies [surprised] their grandfather with a replacement class ring because it [was] stolen 20 years ago... People love this school so much and it has such an impact on people's lives and I just want to remind you that Tech is the best place ever and I'm grateful for the work you do." This message extends to all of you and beyond, to anyone who plays a role in university functions or student life. This is what motivates me to keep looking for areas of improvement, because in another twenty years, I still want to be part of the college with the alumni so in love with their school that they can't shut up about it.

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Good afternoon all. In serving in this role for 9-months, it's clear to me that you all hear us and want to support the student interest as much as I do. In my report today, my objective is to inform you on the perspective of Virginia Tech's commitment to diversity and inclusion, especially as it relates to graduate and professional students. It only feels appropriate to continue the discussion of diversity – of race in our country and in our community, coming out of last week's continued violence against Asian American communities. I ask that we observe a brief moment of silence to honor the 8 victims from last week's tragedy.

I'm going to be offering three recommendations, but before that, I have an overarching message I want to raise.

A diverse student body is beneficial to students and the university at large. By having a representative student body, our students will feel included and like they belong at Virginia Tech. Simultaneously this will help us to attract the talent necessary to bolster our reputation on the world stage.

We are living in an incredibly divisive period in time. An era where saying the wrong thing or supporting the wrong cause can cost a reputation. I'm not going to pretend that this does not create a minefield in which the university must carefully navigate or else lose thousands, maybe millions in funding. This is no revelation, by any means. I raise it to tell you, I understand it.

As the board of visitors, you carry the profound weight of balancing the concerns of race, class, and privilege with the responsibility of ensuring that our university is serving and operating within a competitive, global market with competing priorities. Every action sets a precedent and every inaction displays complacency. When I say that, I mean that we, the students notice and appreciate when the university takes a [firm stance against bigotry](#) ([See also more recent](#)). Simultaneously, we also see inaction and complacency as equally loud messages. We notice when the university is [not willing to name](#) when Black and Brown students in our community are hurting. In speaking with the Black Graduate Student Organization, they explained that university information dissemination often feels like it disregards Black students. We notice when we [fail to provide adequate reparations](#) for the descendants of the Tutelo and Monacan people who were shepherds to this land before Virginia Tech. I notice when we continue to uphold practices that are oppressive to transgender students.

Now, I raise this because I want to emphasize the importance of taking a stance. The best way that we will make progress for minoritized and underrepresented communities is to have those difficult and critical conversations on those subjects. When voting on policy, is it considered how it might impact a student of color? A non-binary student? Students with disabilities? Indigenous students?

I'm here to offer that consistent reminder that the work is not done. Students will continue to raise these, because it is our duty to ensure that those who are at Virginia Tech feel it is home to EVERYONE, not just the majority. I offered a few personal opinions above, but I also come with three recommendations. These recommendations were created through a thorough process that was conducted by the Diversity Sub-committee of the Graduate Student Assembly.

The 2019 climate survey confirmed that fewer Underrepresented Minority (URM) graduate students agreed their advisor was helpful with their dissertation research compared to non-URM graduate students. Only 39% of URM graduate students agreed their advisor was helpful with "advice in writing and revising the dissertation or thesis," compared to 52% of non-URM graduate students

- **Action item #1: Create and implement mandatory faculty training on the [Expectations for Graduate Education](#) by 2026.**

Upon reviewing the expectations for graduate education, they are quite robust. It is important that faculty and those who supervise graduate students have a strong understanding of these, as well as that new faculty are informed. This should be annual or bi-annual training.

There is [variability of enrollment](#) in numbers of URM graduate students across colleges, with some colleges disproportionately enrolling higher numbers of URM graduate students than other colleges.

- **Action item #2: Strive for recruitment and enrollment levels of URM graduate students by college that reflect the overall VT enrollment numbers of URM graduate students by 2026.**

This area has certainly seen improvement over the years. Some programs are more balanced than others, with some not having any URM graduate students. The resounding message from the school at large is that we should have a more diverse graduate student population, let's ensure that the

The graduate school's Office of Recruitment, Diversity and Inclusion (ORDI) has one position to support both enrollment and retention of *all* graduate students. As a catalyst for supporting enrollment and retention of graduate students, the ORDI leaders could put more time and effort into supporting URM graduate students if they had additional employees.

- **Action item #3: Create a full-time A/P Faculty or Staff position within the Graduate School focused solely on graduate student recruitment by 2026.**

If we could find the initiative and funds to expand this department, I am confident that our diversity numbers would improve. More importantly, our underrepresented students would feel more at home if this office had more outreach. We must begin to answer the age-old question of "Okay, we have a diverse student population, now how do we make them feel supported while they are here?"

Virginia Tech is moving forward and has made strides to improve in our commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. I am so pleased to see the progress that has been made. Please understand that this report is not to be taken as an accusation, but an ask that we never lose sight of making ALL students at Virginia Tech feel included.

Before I conclude, I want to offer a final thought. I am not blind to the challenges that come with balancing a budget as massive as Virginia Tech's and at the same time, am willfully persistent that there is always more that can be done to prevent raising tuition. I hope we will continue to pursue our land-grant mission of accessibility in the future and work to be pioneers - forerunners, in large state school affordability, as much as we can. Thank you to the Finance and Resource Management Committee for your work to establish a plan. Please remain diligent as we face the continued challenge of higher education affordability in the future.