

Undergraduate Student Constituency Report

Virginia Tech Board of Visitors

August 26, 2019

Presented by Madelynn Todd, Undergraduate Student Represent

Good afternoon Rector Valeiras, President Sands, members of the Board of Visitors, and distinguished guests. I am honored and extremely excited to be serving as the undergraduate representative to the Board of Visitors for the 2019 – 2020 academic year. I will do my very best to make sure that the views of the undergraduate constituency are conveyed to the Board and assist in addressing topics of concern in any way possible. As this is the beginning of my term, I would like to share some important updates.

Hokies are home! It is apparent when you walk across the campus how excited the students are to begin the new school year here in Blacksburg. This time of year, there is no better place to be than at Virginia Tech. Smiles and laughter abound across campus. This year, we welcome about 7,600 freshmen into the Hokie Family. You can feel the anticipation and perhaps a bit of anxiety, of our freshmen, but many members of Hokie Nation have stepped up to support them. Hokie Helpers have been fantastic, and I have heard nothing but praise from parents and students alike. Even President Sands, Provost Clarke and Chief Foust were not too busy to lend a hand and make everyone feel welcome!

And it appears that Hokies are not the only ones to recognize how incredible our university is. Students have proudly shared the results of a recent Niche Survey across multiple social media platforms. Even unbiased analysts agree that Virginia Tech is a top-notch institution. According to the 2019 Niche Survey, Virginia Tech is in the top 10 public schools in the United States with additional top 10 rankings in student life, food, and the campus. In addition, many programs such as architecture, agricultural sciences, and engineering are among the top in country.

I have taken the lead in working with the Jewish Student Union since the end of last semester and through the summer to address their request for more Kosher food offerings at Virginia Tech. While they acknowledge that the University is committed to diversity and inclusion,

members have expressed a difficulty in locating Kosher food options. In April of this year, members reached out to the Director of Dining Services, Ted Faulkner, in an effort to address this issue, and it ended on a positive note according to the JSU. The possibility of offering pre-packaged Kosher food has been proposed.

In addition, I have also been communicating with the Jewish Student Union on a second issue in regards to religious accommodations and absence policies. The union has been working on a draft resolution over the summer too. I am working with the VP of Student Affairs and others to determine where in process this resolution is and what next steps are needed. I very much appreciate the assistance of Dr. Patty Perillo and others in this matter.

Further, students are looking forward to the new mental health initiatives that have been implemented ahead of the upcoming school year. These include the addition of four new counselor positions at Cook Counseling Center, the engagement of various student groups, and the possibility of embedding counselors within each college. With the increasing pressures faced by many of today's college students, having the resources in place to assist is absolutely critical.

With all the new programs and service improvements in the works, the upcoming school year promises to be one of the best yet. However, some issues still concern many of the undergraduate students.

Obviously, the over-enrollment here at Virginia Tech has been the trending topic even prior to the end of the last semester. Despite initial criticism, most students seem to be handling it better than expected. Although the idea of living at the Inn or HIE may not have been the ideal choice for some, on move-in day, many students expressed excitement at the spaciousness of the rooms and accessibility to a private bath. The added food trucks and extended dining hours may help to keep lines shorter.

And finally, the negative editorial posted by a parent who attended orientation does not appear to concern most undergraduates. Although this might not be the case with parents, nearly all students seem to support the use of gender pronouns as means to further increase inclusion and diversity. I would like to commend the University Communications Team's response to this

matter which was clear, concise, and timely. There was overwhelming support from the undergraduate constituency for the University's position on the issue. The concern in the editorial that conservative students were "educational refugees" was not shared by the College Republicans at Virginia Tech as evidenced in their statement.

Personally, I am very excited to learn about new safety measures that have been implemented over the summer. The addition of a 3-way stop sign on Washington St. should help reduce vehicle-pedestrian accidents. The flashing light in front of the Student Services Building is being tested for effectiveness and seems to be working well according to Dr. Sherwood Wilson, Vice President for Operations.

Finally, as I grow into my new role as undergraduate rep to the Board of Visitors, I have a few action items that I will be working on over the next month. The main issue I want to focus on is how to improve communication with the undergraduate community. I would like to work with BOV social media accounts and the Communications Team in order to find unique and relevant ways to connect with my constituency. I also look forward to viewing the results of the student climate survey conducted in February of this year. I will continue working to improve safety and accessibility across campus. I hope to work with Dr. Christopher Kiwus and the Facilities Department personnel to conduct a safety walk on campus in the upcoming month.

In conclusion, I look forward to serving as the voice of the undergraduate students at Virginia Tech. Please let me know if there is any way I can be of assistance. Thank you for your time and Go Hokies!

Graduate Student Constituency Report
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
August 26, 2019

Ryan King - Graduate Representative to the Board of Visitors

Good afternoon. I want to start by thanking the members of the Board, the graduate school, and the graduate student population for entrusting me to be the graduate student representative to the Board of Visitors for the 19-20 academic year.

Very briefly, I will introduce myself. I am a first generation college student born and raised in Gastonia, North Carolina. I completed my undergraduate education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill before beginning my PhD in Translational Biology, Medicine, and Health at Virginia Tech in 2016. My research focus is investigating minimally invasive therapies to improve survival following cardiac arrest, for which I won a fellowship, this spring, from the National Institutes of Health to fund my research for the next two years. Prior to assuming my role on the Board, I served as the executive chair of the Roanoke Graduate Student Association and the TBMH department delegate to the Graduate Student Assembly. Today marks the first day of my 21st year of class.

Like my predecessor, Zo, I worry that the qualifying words “graduate” or “undergraduate” often get lost when referring to Virginia Tech students. As such, the two student populations become synonymous with one another. While there are certainly overlapping aspects of being a student at either level, there are also quite substantial differences, which Zo so well highlighted in the video series he presented at the last Board meeting. Graduate students are more likely to be older, have spouses, dependents, and elder care responsibilities, and far more likely to not be in Blacksburg. I encourage members of the Board to spend time exploring the “graduate education by the numbers” section of the VT grad school website (<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/about/numbers.html>).

Today, I will speak on two points: 1) Over 30% of the graduate student population **is not** in Blacksburg, and 2) there is a lack of quality, affordable, accessible childcare for graduate students - we fall well behind many of our SCHEV approved peer institutions in this regard (cite Cornell and UC Berkley).

Over the weekend we have had an opportunity to envision the future of the “greater Washington DC metro” area, and you have heard me time and time again advocate for expansion of student services in the area. Something that I believe may have been lost in the conversation is the tense - I was not speaking in future tense, but rather in the present, when indicating a need for student service expansion on extended campuses of Virginia Tech. We must ensure ALL students at Virginia Tech have equitable access to student services and I believe everyone in this room is in agreement (the president just addressed having a VT experience regardless of campus is a priority). From my understanding, a large contribution to the lack of student service availability is directly related to the difference in fee structure for graduate students based on which campus they are pursuing their degree (please note I am not advocating to raise graduate student fees) - I will not attempt to provide a solution, but I would like to encourage everyone to keep thinking about what an equitable model may look like. For any member of the Board, or university

leadership, curious to see what a day is like for a graduate student on a non-Blacksburg I invite you to join me in Roanoke anytime - or, if preferred, I will put you in touch with an NCR student.

Understanding that there is a working group currently operating to assess child care I think it is also timely to stress that graduate students cannot be forgotten in the solution. In the 2018 “additional services for graduate student survey” conducted by the Graduate school 10% of respondents indicated they could use direct assistance in accessing and affording child care. I want to highlight a few services that are already in place at the graduate school.

Since 2003 (**we were the first in the nation with this grant!**), the graduate school has offered a work-life grant program that assist in financially supporting students away on maternity/paternity leave (for up to 6 weeks) during pregnancy and after childbirth. Starting in January 2015, Little Hokies Hangout began programming for children aged 2-5 years; however, Little Hokie Hangouts does not alone have the capacity to meet the graduate student needs and is offered exclusively in Blacksburg - leaving the NCR, Roanoke, Richmond, and Hampton Roads campuses without equitable assistance. Several of our SCHEV approved peer institutions (particularly UC Berkeley and Cornell University) do a better job in supporting their graduate student parents. As many of you no doubt know, graduate enrollment numbers across the nation are on a steady decline; in order to continue competitively recruiting graduate students to Virginia Tech it is imperative that, at a minimum, we keep up with our peer institutions, but this is an area where Virginia Tech has a real possibility to be innovative and become a leader among peers.

Lastly, many graduate students at Virginia Tech who are not on an assistantship are part-time wage employees; as such, I want to state that graduate students support the staff’s efforts to increase the student and non-student wage employee salary paid amount to \$12/hour.

In the coming year, I look forward to continuing to meet graduate students across all of Virginia Tech’s campuses and research locations.

Bullet point summary (and additional points)

- Over 30% of the graduate student population is not in Blacksburg.
- Currently, the benefits/services available to graduate students are not viewed as equitable across campuses by the graduate students. This has created an envious view between campuses.
- We are far behind our SCHEV approved peers in regards to supporting graduate students with dependent (both child care and elder care).
 - “Right now, there is no child care assistance in the NCR. My entire stipend plus some goes into part-time child care. I had to do my own research to try and stay within a price range, luckily I found a somewhat decent center, but childcare is extremely high in this region and any little bit would help.” - Maryann Romero, MBA candidate at NCR.
- Graduate school enrollment numbers are declining nationally - in order to stay competitive in recruiting efforts it is essential that VT at least match benefits offered by our peer institutions, but there is a real opportunity for us to become a leader among peers.

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

Madelynn Todd – Undergraduate Representative to the Board of Visitors

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you for your time,

Ryan King

Food Access for Students

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