Good morning, everyone! It gives me tremendous joy to be here with you all today! I'd want to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to serve in this role. I am eager to get started and collaborate closely with every one of you during my term. My name is Jamal Ross, and I will be the Undergraduate Representative to the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Board of Visitors in 2022-23! I am a fourth-year student studying Political Science with a legal studies option as well as Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. Amelia Court House, Virginia is my hometown. Throughout my time at Virginia Tech, I have found delight and enthusiasm in a variety of leadership roles both on and off campus, such as a resident assistant, orientation leader, and undergraduate researcher in the Political Science and Applied Economics departments. During my term, I intend to portray the undergraduate student population in a way that not only paints an image of the undergraduate student body, but also tells a story about the undergraduate student body and provides a variety of views. As I talk to you today, I am not just Jamal Ross, but also the link between the board and the over 30,000 undergraduate students that attend Virginia Tech. I want to give insight into undergraduate students' everyday activities and experiences, so I'm taking notes, asking questions, and leading talks to observe what students are experiencing, hearing, and desiring during their time at Virginia Tech.

Everything appears to move at the speed of light around this time of year. Students are returning to Blacksburg, settling into their resident halls or off-campus homes, and preparing for the forthcoming academic school year. The Great Migration, as I call it, began last week. Move-in week is one of the busiest times of the Virginia Tech Academic Year. During this period, I witnessed our university's motto "Ut Prosim" in action. Our whole undergraduate body of returning available students and other university volunteers worked diligently to assist and greet their new fellow Hokies. I can't go any farther without praising Virginia Tech! We are a genuine
powerhouse, as seen by the high number of incoming students, record admissions, and one of the most diverse classes in Virginia Tech history. This demonstrates that we are doing well and will continue to improve and change as the years pass.

Let us now go deeper into our student body and analyze the various aspects that make up Virginia Tech. We need to concentrate on the decisions we make, how we execute them, and how they affect our students. Then consider what is appropriate for our students and what they require to succeed, while also aligning with university policies that allow for the university's success and progress. Today, I'd want to focus on four major topics: safety, accessibility, affordability, and food insecurity. Going out and putting myself in their shoes, being in their locations, and asking them questions is a terrific way to understand the student body and interact with this many students. So I committed to attending events, engaging in various volunteer projects, and working directly with students throughout the summer and into our current month of August. And I begin with a simple question: "How are you, Hokie?" This one sentence unleashes a torrent of knowledge, allowing me to consider several areas to focus on as the academic school year progresses. Students' primary worry was their health and safety. What we must remember is that Covid-19 has touched the majority of our undergraduate students in some way, which has influenced their manner of learning and development through their academics and has changed the dynamic on campus as we move forward. Some students are nonetheless concerned about the future of the university's lectures and programs. Students praise the university's announcement on Covid-19-related regulations, and I want to express my gratitude for giving many ways to keep our Hokies healthy! Another aspect of campus safety is the university's environment and climate. Students have praised the initiatives and hard work of the Sexual Violence Culture and Climate Working Group. Thank you for establishing this, Dr.
Timothy Sands, and I look forward to working with you as this group achieves significant accomplishments for the institution.

Another major concern of the undergraduate student body is accessibility. This includes those with impairments attempting to get from one side of campus to the other. An individual who has a mobility limitation has very few alternatives for getting from the east to the west side of campus without crossing paths into an obstruction or going significantly off the beaten route, making it impossible to walk freely across campus. This is related to the concept of accessibility in terms of how the cost(s) affect our students. The institution places a high value on attrition, whether for diversification or enrollment, but once students arrive, retention is a concern due to Virginia Tech's affordability. This is important to keep in mind when we make judgments about how we can best help students during their transition and matriculation at Virginia Tech. Other significant and current concerns on campus include sustainability and food poverty. A "Hungry Hokie" is not something we desire. Students responded that the growing cost of meals has affected them and has caused them to make changes in order to see what they can buy and use to feed themselves. We should collaborate to make food more secure on campus for our students and start a dialogue about trash on our campus and how we can reduce waste generation. I'd want to continue our chat with you in greater depth and seek any advice for next steps.

As I finish, I intend to offer you with raw facts and statistics from our students over my term. So, during the year, I will be accumulating various data points to construct a more complete image of the undergraduate student population, which will be named "The Representative Ross Report." This will feature quotations and agenda items gleaned from personal talks and meetings with students and campus partners throughout my tenure in this position. I'd want to thank the board for all of your hard work, and we appreciate you all very
much! I'm thrilled to be able to collaborate with you this year, and I wish you well, live long, and prosper, and as always, Let’s Go Hokies!
Report from the Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors
Anna Buhle

Hello, Rector Long, Vice Rector Baine, members of the Board, President Sands, and other guests.

Before I begin, I would like to introduce myself. I am a fourth-year medical student and the first medical student representative to the Board of Visitors. This is the second time I have been fortunate to be a student at Virginia Tech as I completed my undergraduate degree here as well in Biochemistry and Microbiology. This May, I am excited to graduate and begin my residency in obstetrics and gynecology.

During my first few months as the graduate student representative, two topics in particular have emerged that I would like to focus on today - graduate student stipends and graduate student housing.

First, graduate students at Virginia Tech are not being paid a living wage. Almost three quarters of students on assistantships are barely making the minimum to afford fundamentals such as food and housing as well as the expenses of being a graduate student.\(^1\) Additionally, this data does not include out of pocket medical expenses, additional educational expenses, or childcare costs which can be considerable especially in the generally older graduate student population.\(^1\) As one might predict, there is great variability between the cost of living in Blacksburg compared to Roanoke and Washington D.C.; with the cost of living being nearly $1,000 per month more in D.C. than in Blacksburg but the average stipend in D. C. being less than the other two campuses.\(^1\)

This is particularly troubling when considering that the graduate students that Virginia Tech enrolls are highly educated and often with many years of work experience. As follows, many students here made the choice to further their education at Virginia Tech ahead of or instead of pursuing lucrative positions in industry. When they chose Virginia Tech, most assumed that they would be well cared for, and that the university would support them in meeting their basic needs to live while they pursue their education. While the data presented in the Graduate Student Assembly Cost of Living Report (discussed above) is discouraging, it did give the university valuable insight into the financial stress graduate students face and led to the creation of a task force to address this serious problem. Currently, the
Graduate Stipend Task Force twice a month and at each meeting members come prepared and passionate to find a solution.

Second, safe, stable, and affordable housing continues to be a pressing problem for graduate students across all our campuses. Several students in the D.C area have reached out to me directly, concerned about the cost of housing, and near complete lack of affordable housing. Their stress is palpable. Students in Blacksburg have similar concerns. Housing is in high demand. Since 2013, there has been less than a 2% apartment vacancy rate in Blacksburg. With such demand and with inflation, rents have skyrocketed. Between 2019 and 2020 there was a 9% increase in rent. Many graduate students have begun searching for affordable housing outside of Blacksburg which increases their commute time, and for many, raises concerns about reliable transportation to campus. The rising cost of living, coupled with low wages, is leading to housing and food insecurity, and significant psychological and physical stress placed on our students.

Virginia Tech gives a lot to its graduate students, from education to mentorship and student support, the university provides incredible opportunities for us to advance our education and build a strong career. And graduate and professional students, in return, contribute significantly to the university. We develop new ideas, publish research, present at conferences, bring in grants, and teach classes all of which expand the reputation and prestige of our university. The issues I just described leave graduate students vulnerable. The significant associated stress puts them at high risk for health issues and is a detriment to the education they are trying to obtain. To address this problem is a daunting task. However, this is also an incredible opportunity for the university to become a national leader in graduate student support. Prospective graduate students will certainly take notice of the action taken here. And by mitigating the financial stress felt nearly universally by graduate students, Virginia Tech will be able attract candidates from diverse backgrounds and of the highest caliber.

Thank you.

References:
