

Virginia Tech BOV Meeting
June 11, 2024
President's Open Session Remarks

The Blacksburg campus is deceptively quiet as we are busy preparing for the coming year.

As we look back on last year, world events made their way into campus life, as they should. Conflicts that may seem to be a world away impact a global community like the one we have here. It is personal to many. Especially those with connections to Israel and Gaza. My responsibility, and the responsibility of the faculty and administrators, is to ensure that students and employees who are directly impacted have the support they need, that our students have venues and forums for learning, dialogue and debate, and that our faculty have the freedom to pursue teaching, engagement and scholarship, reflecting the role of universities in our society as institutions for discovery and the dissemination of knowledge. That said, we have policies designed to ensure that the university can continue to promote a safe environment that is conducive to learning. This past year, some of our students reported that they had experienced incidents of anti-Semitism, anti-Palestinian racism and Islamophobia. Such experiences are not consistent with the ideals we promote in our Principles of Community. As we approach the fall, we are working with students, faculty and administrators to develop structured conversations around discrimination, how to report it, and how to mitigate it through education and constructive dialogue.

One program that is particularly promising is called "Perspectives," a program developed by the Constructive Dialogue Institute and adapted to meet the needs of Virginia Tech. Perspectives includes asynchronous lessons, peer-to-peer dialogue, and written reflections, all designed to promote constructive dialogue across differences. Perspectives was piloted over the last academic year with students who live on campus, including the Corps of Cadets. Eight hundred students started the program, and over 500 have completed it so far. Those that have completed report increased confidence in communicating across differences. In the coming academic year, we move from the pilot phase to Phase I of implementation. Thousands of Virginia Tech students will experience Perspectives over the coming year. We will be sure to report back to the BOV on the effectiveness of this program. Thanks especially to VP Frances Keene and Associate Vice Provost Ellington Graves for their leadership of this initiative and numerous others that support the development of Hokies as leaders in dialogue across differences.

The skills of constructive dialogue across differences are not only valuable for our students, they are arguably essential for our instructional faculty as well. A companion initiative to Perspectives is called "Foundations in Facilitating Dialogue." Over 60 Virginia Tech faculty have participated in Foundations workshops so far.

This work is important because it directly addresses a fundamental challenge we have as a university – one we share with universities around the country. That is the erosion of public trust in our institutions of higher education. Having been engaged with university life at

three institutions for nearly four decades now, I attribute some of that diminishment in trust to the inability of some in our community to separate scholarship from political activism. Scholars have an obligation to evaluate issues objectively and to present multiple perspectives to our students without telling our students what to think. That's easier said than done. It is an art. It takes practice. I can understand how through a lifetime of study, a scholar's personal views that have been shaped by deep analysis and experience could lead to a decision to become an activist. That's a defensible – even admirable - choice. But we have to understand that once a scholar is perceived as an activist, they lose the trust of some of the public and our students as a scholar. We have some faculty members who thread that needle with skill. I would estimate that our students do not know the political leanings of 90% of our instructional faculty. For the remainder, we have a challenge. The skills that are taught in Foundations are important to regaining that trust and strengthening the critical thinking skills of our students.

As I reflect on my ten years in this role at Virginia Tech, I am proud of the progress we have made, but there is so much left to accomplish in advancing Virginia Tech.

- Our university is bigger than it was in 2014. Total enrollment has increased by 23%,
- It is more diverse, with a 36% increase in underrepresented and underserved students.
- Our endowment is bigger by a factor of 2.4 times, which represents a 50% increase per student in inflation-adjusted dollars.
- Our US News ranking has improved from #71 to #47, top 20 among public universities and number 2 in Virginia.
- Our athletics program is much stronger across all sports, with football in resurgence.
- Annual fundraising has tripled from about \$80M/yr to mid-\$200Ms, on the way to \$300M.
- Our VTC Health Science & Technology campus in Roanoke has grown tremendously in infrastructure and impact.
- The North Academic District of the Blacksburg campus is nearly complete.
- Our innovation campus in Alexandria is about to open its doors.

But we have more to do. About a quarter of our Virginia undergraduates do not yet have the financial and supporting resources they need to launch into the next phase of their lives with momentum. The Virginia Tech Advantage addresses that need. Last year we committed to raising \$500M over a decade to complement institutional state and federal support. As you heard from SVP Phlegar, we are \$43M into that goal, well ahead of our FY24 target of \$25M.

Our second major challenge is elevating our impact as Virginia's land-grant research university through achieving Global Distinction. Virginia Tech at its full potential should be

able to bring the world's best talent and partners from all over the world to the Commonwealth. We are making steady progress, with extramural research expenditures up by 44% in the nine years from FY14 to FY23, well ahead of the 28% increase in CPI, but most of that progress has been made since FY22. I am confident that at the end of this fiscal year, we will have seen three years in a row of double-digit percentage increases in expenditures. That momentum will eventually be reflected in increases in rankings and global reputation, which are in turn proxies for the ability to attract talent and opportunities.

While the Virginia Tech Advantage and Virginia Tech Global Distinction are our primary foci, there are many other dimensions of the university that present challenges and opportunities, among them the integration of bridge experiences such as internships into every curriculum, and the new era of Athletics which includes revenue sharing and opportunities for our student-athletes to monetize their name, image and likeness.

I'm excited to get started on my second decade!

Thank you, and Go Hokies!