

Faculty Senate Meeting Agenda and Minutes

September 3, 2021, @ 2:30pm

Via Zoom

Senators Present:

Montasir Abbas, Biko Agozino, Diane Agud, Susan Anderson, Richard Ashley, Joseph Baker, Arthur Ball, Azziza Bankole, Hilary Bryon, Virginia Buechner-Maxwell, Andrew Binks, Scott Case, Guopeng Cheng, George Davis, Ashley Dayer, William Ducker, Joseph Guthrie, Crystal Duncan Lane, John Ferris, Becky Funk, James Hawdon, Kevin Heaslip, David Hicks, Bob Hicok, Daniel Hindman, Ran Jin, Brett Jones, Eric Kaufman, Nathan King, Bradley Klein, Vivica Kraak, Evan Lavender-Smith, Justin Lemkul, Alexander Leonessa, Jason Malone, Caitlin Martinkus, Frances McCarty, Rachel Miles, Deborah Milley (Alternate for Paul Avery), Michael Nappier, Amy Nelson, Aaron Noble, Gregory Novack, Thomas O'Donnell, Sarah Parker, Bruce Pencek, Christopher Pierce, Thomas Pingel, Patrick Pithua, Nicole Pitterson, Robin Queen, Steve Rideout, Susanna Rinehart, Micah Roos, Todd Schenk, Charles Schleupner, Ashley Shew Heflin, Richard Shryock, Laura Strawn, Cornel Sultan, Jay Teets, Steve Thompson, James Tokuhisa, Diego Troya, Kwok Tsui, Anna Ward Bartlett, Layne Watson, Robert Weiss, Cynthia Wood, Hehuang Xie, Yan Xu, Liqing Zhang (72)

Guests: Luke Achenie, Alex Kinnaman, Ellen Plummer, April Myers (4)

(76 attended via Zoom)

Call to Order by Senate President Robert Weiss at 2:33pm**1 Consent Agenda and Approval of Minutes**

Unless a member requests an item be removed from the Consent Agenda, these items will be approved by unanimous consent

- Approval of the Faculty Senate Agenda for September 3, 2021.
- Approval and posting of the Faculty Senate meeting minutes from August 20, 2021.

The consent agenda was presented and a motion to approve the consent agenda was made by Robert Weiss and was seconded by A.K. Ward Bartlett. With no comments or objections from the floor these items were passed by unanimous consent.

2 Brief Announcements and Updates

Updates on COVID testing:

- There are about 1500 students and 1800 faculty and staff members who need COVID tests. This number is expected to decrease given the vaccine requirement for employees. Hopefully additional testing capacity for surveillance testing will be available. Robert Weiss asked the Faculty Senators for any updates for testing.
- Ashley Shew updated the Senate with the answers she received to the questions she sent to the VTReady site about COVID testing on campus. She also asked if an appointment is needed.

QUESTION: Will there be covid testing on campus available to faculty, staff, and students? [If not, is there a plan to stay in touch with covid testing in the region that would provide some data about university affiliated COVID positives?]

ANSWER: COVID testing will occur for those employees and students who filed for exemptions on medical or religious reasons. Also, those who are symptomatic may receive a test. Voluntary testing is available (as capacity allows) for employees and students who fall into the following categories: Asymptomatic — Fully vaccinated individuals who have had an exposure to a positive case (work and otherwise); Pre-travel tests — Individuals in these groups can schedule a test through VT Notify for one of the Blacksburg campus testing sites. Testing appointments can also be scheduled at certain pharmacies and urgent care facilities throughout Virginia for unvaccinated employees.

- Biko Agozino reported that students did not know the process to inform other students to get tested when they have a positive case. This discussion item was moved to the open discussion session later in the agenda.
- Alex Leonessa and Deborah Milly reported that appointments for testing are needed. There is a link to schedule testing, shared by faculty senators:
<https://vtnotify.students.vt.edu/index.php/patient/appointment>
- Amy Nelson asked if the prevalence testing should be provided to all members or just members with symptoms. This discussion item was moved to the open discussion session later in the agenda.

Updates on the endorsement of the Open Letter:

The Faculty Senate sent a letter to the Provost and President in support of the letter based on the outcome from the Faculty Senate vote.

Faculty Senate Priorities for 2021-2022

- In the first Faculty Senate Cabinet meeting on August 27, 2021, the Cabinet members discussed topics for the Faculty Senate this year. The Faculty Senate Cabinet is in the process of consolidating and prioritizing the topics for the 2021-2022 academic year.
- In addition to the list of topics proposed by Senators at the August 20, 2021 meeting, we will also have discussions about experiential learning and bridge experiences.
- Robert Weiss is going to appoint a parliamentarian for all meetings.
- The Faculty Senate will be using Robert's Rules of Order during all meetings.
- No votes will be conducted if they are not on the agenda to allow for appropriate discussion and to allow Senators to have sufficient time to discuss the vote with members of their unit.

3 Election of the Virginia Tech Representatives to the Faculty Senate of Virginia

- Susanna Rinehart will continue as the Senator to the Faculty Senate of Virginia.
- Three representatives needed to be elected.
- Robert Weiss sent an email to all faculty senators requesting nominations for the position
- Robert Weiss proposed the selection of representatives on a first come, first serve basis.
- Robert Weiss made a motion to hold the election of the following slate of representatives by unanimous consent. Todd Schenk seconded the motion. With no comments from the floor the motion passed by unanimous consent.
- The elected representatives are
 - Susan Anderson (Mathematics)
 - Laura Straw (Food Science and Technology)
 - Onwubiko (Biko) Agozino (Sociology)

4 Discussion on First Two Weeks of Classes

Possible Questions:

- What went well, what did not?
- Have there been any issues with masks or unruly students in general?
- Formation of a taskforce to consider the impact of mask-wearing on instruction
- Scott Case discussed the following feedback from CEE faculty members:

- It would be better to have the virtual option for larger classes. Current classroom configuration makes it challenging. It is impossible for instructors to hear what students in class are saying.
 - A faculty reported that students in his class tested positive and they felt they have gotten COVID from the Blacksburg Transit.
 - There are a lot of concerns about the classrooms in Randolph Hall, where the air conditioning is not functioning and has inadequate ventilation (measured by CO2 levels).
 - There were some concerns institutionally about custodial services and whether the University has adequate staffing in the dining halls.
- Biko Agozino shared the concerns of his colleague who teaches in a crowded room without the ability to open windows. When she opened the door of the class it is noisy. Another issue is that she just got informed about a positive case in her class and she does not know what she can do regarding letting other students know about the positive case and is also looking for the possibility to move to the online class.
 - Robert Weiss suggested discussing the teaching modality with her Department Head.
 - Contact tracing is not done by Virginia Tech; this must be handled by the New River health district.
 - Steve Thompson shared a concern of his colleague, whose request to get a COVID test was declined on the grounds that she had already been vaccinated and that she didn't demonstrate symptoms. She wanted to get tested and she had to go to a private clinic or her personal physician. The University would not provide the service for her.
 - Robert Weiss asked all the senators to report if their COVID test requests were declined. If this is a universal issue, this must be addressed, especially with the testing capacity increasing after October 1.
 - Ashley Dayer reported that there are some unmasked students in the hallways and buildings and between classes and that seems to be increasing over time. Also, some students are not wearing masks close to face, or masks that are repeatedly falling below the noses. In outdoor labs, where some faculty are teaching the students are getting close to each other, and faculty must repeatedly remind students not to do so because they are not wearing masks.
 - Ashley Dayer also reported that there were some concerns about the misleading dashboard. The disclosure form of the positive cases from students and faculty should be updated in the dashboard. The information would be more transparent to students and faculty.
 - There were a lot of concerns about the definition of "close contact". The faculty were told that students who are wearing masks in classes are not considered close contacts, even if they are sitting right next to a person with a positive test. Given the definition that VDH is using for close contact, the Delta variant, poor quality masks,

and unfitted masks, there were concerns by faculty regarding potential transmission in the classroom.

- Concerns were raised over the increase in positive cases with the big football game today (9/3/2021) and associated parties. The faculty want to make sure there are clear plans on how these issues are going to be addressed in the coming weeks.
- Ashley Dayer also reported that aside from the masking related issues, a faculty member was pretty concerned about a report on unusual student behavior this year, concerned about sexual assault, and concerned that students are doing very inappropriate things and hoping that the University will address these concerns.
- Evan Lavender-Smith shared the concerns from students about the availability of masks. The general feeling among students was that they don't have access to masks. Graduate students expressed that mask availability is challenging, especially for students who didn't bring any masks with them and perhaps don't have the money to afford and find the masks.
 - Robert Weiss mentioned that his department still provides masks to students. It is an important health and safety issue to address.
 - Susan Anderson stated that she would contact someone at the New River Health District to see if free masks could be provided.
 - Central PPE distribution will begin again based on a VT News article.
- Rachel Miles reported that there are a lot of people especially on the fourth floor of the library where a lot of group discussions happen; people are not masking so employees are feeling uncomfortable. Masks are required in the library no matter vaccination status. Rachel would like to know the library administration's position on this issue. Last year there was security in the library responsible to help people who were not masking. There are good reasons for not having security in the library.
- Bruce Pencek reported that because masking is not required when eating or drinking, many students are not wearing masks for an extended period of time.
- Similarly, students need to drink water in very hot classrooms, and this leads to a need to briefly remove their masks.
- Robert Weiss discussed that the dashboard data should be updated. The clarification on how close the students are sitting should be addressed. The access to the PPE for students will also be addressed.
- Monty Abbas mentioned that microphones are not properly functioning in some classrooms.
- Jim Tokuhisa indicates that about 10-20% students were excusing themselves because of concerns about having symptoms of COVID-19 based on an informal poll.

- Another suggestion is to check the number of students meeting SSD accommodation. Faculty should also have the capability and possibility of suggesting solutions to some of the perceived problems with the SSD.
- Robert Weiss and Robin Queen are going to meet the SSD director together with a small group of faculty senators as well as other potential stakeholders and try to discuss potential resolutions. George Davis asked Robert Weiss for an overview of the general policy on different class modalities. Robert Weiss discussed that if there are academic reasons to change the modality then decisions would be made by the Provost's office. If the request is due to health reasons or accommodation, then the faculty will need to request through the Office of Equity and Accessibility. Then the department head will be informed to make the decision and identify alternative instructors and change the modality if the change is approved.
 - Robert Weiss will prepare a statement about the process to change class modalities due to health reasons.
- Kevin Cheng reported that one student sent the accommodation letter and asked the instructor to wear clear masks during teaching in a large class. There was a concern about whether the clear mask offered the same level of protection as an N95. Some samples of clear masks can be obtained through the SSD office. A question was asked about whether SSD should be prepared with high quality masks to provide for instructors when there is an accommodation request rather than asking faculty to buy high quality masks to accommodate students.
- Robert Weiss asked how masks might affect teaching performance, delivery, and for any helpful tips.
- Layne Watson reported that using a microphone with a mask is effective in course delivery. Sometimes students cannot hear the instructor clearly if the instructor is wearing a mask without the microphone in smaller classrooms.
- Eric Martin reported that it is challenging to understand students' responses to the lecture when they are masked.
- Ashley Dayer reported challenges with in-class discussions since students cannot hear each other when everyone is talking and in masks. Her feeling was that teaching in person during COVID was decreasing the quality of the class.
 - Robert Weiss discussed that a task force will be formed to assess and document how mask wearing impacts teaching performance and learning outcomes. The topic will be further discussed in the FS cabinet. The mask wearing should be considered for course planning as well as the SPOT teaching evaluations.

4 Open-Floor Discussion

- **Inadequacy of Indoor Recreation Facilities**

Joe Guthrie shared a concern from a colleague regarding the inadequacy of indoor recreation facilities. McComas Hall is the only indoor recreation facility available for faculty currently and it is shared with students. When the student population

increases, it is important for the administration to find a plan to have sufficient facilities. A request was made to determine if there were any plans for expanding faculty indoor recreation facilities.

- **Salary Compression**

- Bruce Pencek inquired about salary compression: he was wondering what the administration was planning to do for people who have been hired in the past 10 to 20 years, whose salaries have not kept up with the rate that is received by new hires, and who also received no merit adjustments for several years. The salary compression issue has been discussed for many years and has been in many reports to the Board of Visitors. Every time the response is yes this is a concern and they are going to work on the issue and to this point, no actions have been taken. It is suggested that there should be milestones and timelines to address this issue.
- Robert mentioned that this issue is under discussion by the administration. The most critical part is the University does not have adequate funding to accommodate these adjustments. This is an important topic that will be addressed for retention and equity. He explained that currently the salary raise is only considered in the areas and programs for which the University needs to compete with other universities or industries for talent. A universal salary raise at the University is not feasible. The link of the slides from the BOV retreat (mentioning competitive compensation) was shared with all Faculty Senators: <https://bov.vt.edu/assets/August%202021%20Retreat%20Materials.pdf>

- **Prevalence Testing**

In the prevalence testing, it would be nice to have random testing to get in front of any outbreaks.

- **Experiential Learning**

Evan Lavender-Smith mentioned that there is a lack of awareness of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and Experiential Learning (EL) among faculty. Robert Weiss mentioned that there were a lot of discussions in the past and on-going discussion. There is a steering committee co-lead by John Ferris and Kim Filer. John Ferris also gave a brief update: when it comes to the implementation phase, the steering committee and faculty subcommittee will come to the faculty senate with brief introductions and documents for review and comment.

What does Experiential Learning mean to Virginia Tech? The faculty will have the opportunity to discuss and vote on the definition and the body of work for Experiential Learning. The steering committee and the faculty subcommittee were formed by Experiential Learning experts from each college appointed by the faculty senate cabinet, which represents the faculty's voice.

- **Guidelines to Report Positive Cases**

Today, the Provost office will share the guidelines to report on the positive cases both for employees and for students. Robert Weiss will get the guidelines and share the guidelines with the Faculty Senators.

- **Streamline of the Faculty Senate Workflow**

Robert Weiss suggests new ways to communicate within the Faculty Senate via a SharePoint site. He will invite some faculty senators to complete beta testing of the system.

- **Uneven Information Sharing**

Ashley Shew mentioned the uneven information sharing about the policy, such as no eating and drinking in the classroom and classroom behaviors, the outdated and misleading dashboard (not mapping a lot of instructors' experiences on number of cases), and lack of information on the VT ready website. Last week, Eric Kaufman identified a list of inaccurate information and outdated links. The Faculty Senate has shared those issues with the administration.

Robin Queen mentioned that the University has a decentralized model at Virginia Tech and information flow following the order from the Dean and the Department Head chain. Therefore, the communication is conveyed in diverse ways in different colleges.

- **Some Questions Asked during the Meeting:**

Would it be possible to share what other universities are doing and to ask the Provost's Office to display daily COVID info on dashboards using graphs and infographics? UC San Diego example:

<https://returntolearn.ucsd.edu/dashboard/index.html>

What have we heard from faculty teaching in metro DC? What channels do they have to hear what we in BBG do?

Robert mentioned it would be great to hear the opinions from others on the Blacksburg campus.

5 Meeting Adjourn

Robert Weiss made the motion to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Todd Schenk. The meeting was adjourned at 4:04PM.