

Faculty Senate Meeting Minutes

January 14, 2022, @ 2:30pm

Via Zoom

Check-In

Senators Present: Montasir Abbas, Masoud Agah, Onwubiko Agozino, Diane Agud, Susan Anderson, Richard Ashley, Jonathan Auguste, Paul Avey, Joseph Baker, Arthur Ball, Azziza Bankole, A.K. Bartlett, Andrew Binks, Hilary Bryon, Tanyel Bulbul, Scott Case, Guopeng Cheng, George Davis, Ashley Dayer, Crystal Lane, John Ferris, Carla Finkelstein, Becky Funk, Matthew Gabriele, James Hawdon, Kevin Heaslip, David Hicks, Bob Hicok, Daniel Hindman, Ran Jin, Brett Jones, Eric Kaufman, Nathan King, Alex Kinnaman (Alternate for Rachel Miles), Bradley Klein, Vivica Kraak, Leigh Krometis, Heidi Lane (Alternate for Sarah Parker), Evan Lavender-Smith, Justin Lemkul, Alexander Leonessa, Jonathan Maher, Jason Malone, Caitlin Martinkus, Frances McCarty, Michael Nappier, Amy Nelson, Aaron Noble, Gregory Novack, Thomas O'Donnell, Thomas Pingel, Nicole Pitterson, Robin Queen, Steven Rideout, Susanna Rinehart, Nicholas Robbins, Todd Schenk, Charles Schleupner, Richard Shryock, Ryan Stewart, Laura Strawn, Jay Teets, Steve Thompson, James Tokuhisa, Diego Troya, Kwok Tsui, Layne Watson, Robert Weiss, Cynthia Wood, Yan Xu, Liqing Zhang (71)

Guests: Sara Arena, Ronald Fricker, April Myers, Anita Walz (4)

(75 attended via Zoom)

Call to Order by Senate President Robert Weiss at 2:34pm

1. Approval of Agenda and Minutes (Robert Weiss)

- Motion was made and seconded to approve the Faculty Senate Agenda for January 14, 2022. Motion carried by unanimous consent.
- Motion was made and seconded to approve and post the Faculty Senate meeting minutes for December 10, 2021 ([Link](#)) Motion carried by unanimous consent. The consent agenda was presented and a motion to approve the consent agenda was made, seconded, and passed by unanimous consent.

2. Announcements

- The resolutions required to advance the revisions to shared governance at Virginia Tech will be sent to the Senate for review prior to the January 21 meeting. The University Council Constitution and Bylaws will have first reading at the January 21 meeting and then second reading and a vote for approval on February 11.

- Commission and Committee Reporting: starting on Jan. 21, the operations officer will contact the Senators serving as representatives in Commissions and Committees asking each to provide a short paragraph as an update. The request will be made every other week and anything reported will be provided at the end of the Faculty Senate agenda. The request will be sent on Friday and Senators will be asked to provide these updates by the following Tuesday before noon so that the Faculty Senate agenda can be finalized.
- Member for Academies of Faculty Service and Leadership: Robert Weiss asked the Faculty Senators to send him nomination of anyone willing to serve on this committee
- Joseph Guthrie has been appointed by Governor-elect Glenn Youngkin to be the Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services. He will leave Virginia Tech and the faculty senate. A new faculty senator will be elected from his department.

3. Resolution Commenting Process

R. Queen asked the Faculty Senators to review the resolution commenting process. The senators voted for the proposed resolution review and commenting process during the faculty senate meeting. The process was approved by the Senate (Yes: 64, No: 0, Abstain: 5)

4. Discussion of the Faculty Senate Statement of the Targeted Harassment

The updated statement was shared with the senators. There was a short discussion about details of the statement and there was no consensus. The authors of the statement will make additional changes and the statement as it is written will be voted on during the January 28, 2022 meeting. .

5. Open-Floor Discussion

There was a brief discussion among the senators about a desire for increased clarity on the process for teaching modality changes this semester. Some departments are not considering these requests at all even for short term shifts in teaching modality. Additional discussions will be had with the Provost to request clarification be provided to colleges and departments regarding the options.

6. President Sands

Robert Weiss welcomed President Sands to the Faculty Senate meeting and invited President Sands to give an opening remark.

President Sands is optimistic about the new semester and is looking forward to working with faculty to address concerns throughout the semester. The University is committed to protect the most vulnerable, to lower the burden to local healthcare systems, and to maintain the educational quality through providing the best learning experiences.

The students, especially undergraduate students, want to be in person. Students also love the flexibility in some cases of having an online class. In the future there will likely be shifts in higher education towards mixed modality teaching for specific types of courses

President Sands reported that the hospitalization rate of employees and students is low. Given our high vaccination rates, booster mandate, and improvements to room ventilation, Virginia Tech is in a good position as we start the spring semester.

Faculty are eligible for accommodations related to personal disability status, including immunocompromised. They can submit a request for consideration to the Office of Equity and Accessibility, which has an expedited process for review. If an accommodation is authorized, the office will communicate with the employee in the college to identify an appropriate accommodation that meets the needs for the employee as well as the business interests of the University. If the faculty is looking for shorter term accommodations, then the unit administrator in consultation with the Dean may approve a short-term temporary conversion to virtual learning. If students have an in-person class accommodation request, then the request should be accommodated. The University wants to preserve the in-person instruction to the degree possible.

Robert Weiss started to pass the collected questions from faculty to President Sands. Below is a brief summary of the Q&A:

- Can you please describe the plan for an off-ramp to the COVID mitigations? There are about 10%-15% of our peer institutions who have decided to begin the semester online. It would be better if Virginia Tech can maintain a normal semester schedule. The University has no evidence of COVID transmission in the classroom or instructional environment. The university is upgrading the mask recommendation. Going remote doesn't solve the problem because there are still students on campus and in the community. The data will be closely monitored and decisions will be made based on the severity of illness rather than transmission rate.

There are a number of criteria to trigger the discussion about removing masks and it had to do with the level of transmission. The Omicron variant is different from Delta. The University will consider a change in the mask policy once we see a decline in the case numbers from Omicron and will likely be later in February. The University is not going to tell people to remove their masks but may make masks optional.

- Teaching modality: How is the university going to improve teaching delivery given the lesson we learned over the past two years and how could this have a positive impact on the land grant mission?

Before the pandemic, we were talking about how we could make our classes more flexible and offer them to students in remote locations (study abroad) and still have them actively engaged in the course. President Sands acknowledged that in the long-term this is where we need to head and that these types of changes to teaching should be driven by faculty and their pedagogical needs, not from the top down. Students appreciate the flexibility that comes with online learning and often still prefer some in-person components.

- Teaching Modality: What should we do if a student claims they are positive or simply are afraid of attending class in person?

If the individuals are positive, they should spend at least five days in isolation and may be longer if they still have symptoms. They should be wearing a mask for five subsequent days.

The University and faculty should provide flexibility to students to accommodate needs using the same methods as was done prior to COVID.

- Teaching Modality: Are faculty required to offer students a separate virtual lecture? It is important to check with the Provost's statement. Generally speaking, faculty have the flexibility to decide whether to offer virtual lectures or parallel tracks.

- Teaching Modality: Do the faculty have the ability to survey students in a course and transition to virtual learning of this is the vote of the majority? Any change in teaching modality should be done after checking with Department Heads or Program director. Obviously, there is an opportunity to go virtual for a limited period as needed. If there is low attendance, the faculty have the flexibility to make the changes for a short period of time in consultation with a Department Head or program director. It is important that if a student has a disability or an accommodation that requires in person instruction that faculty provide this option as well.

- Mitigation Plans: If decision making is based on hospitalization and death, how will that delay the impact of our response? The University is tracking hospitalization and serious illness and is trying to collect data on symptoms. Severe illness and community spread of Omicron has not been documented, We are tracking workforce availability by job title and by unit, just to make sure we do not get caught off guard and have to change services. We are working with hospitals and other healthcare providers to understand their capacity for emergencies.

- Mitigation Plan: How are "severe illness" and "community spread" being defined? What is your benchmark for pivoting to hybrid or remote learning? We are developing different categories for severity that will be available on the dashboard. We didn't see spread of the virus in instructional settings where everyone is wearing a mask and there is not a set benchmark for pivoting to hybrid or remote mode. The indicators will be based on the stress on a hospital system, the availability of students for learning in person, and the availability of workforce.

- Mitigation Plan: How will the university support faculty, staff and students if they become ill? We will continue what has been done. All students have been asked to have isolation plans for students, including those who cannot return home. For faculty and staff, we have a case management team to work with faculty and staff.

- Mitigation Plan: How are mask mandates going to be enforced? We don't plan to change from how things were managed last semester. Changes have been made for in-door athletic events due to increasing risks of the Omicron variant.

Open Q&A during the meeting:

- What is your read on the mental health status of our students?

The mental and emotional health of students or those in isolation is not good. This is a national trend that we are also seeing on campus. We know that shared experiences and community support are absolutely critical for mental and emotional health. The demand to have adequate support services is increased based on the needs seen at Schiffert Health.

- How is the change in the state administration going to affect Virginia Tech and our mitigation strategies?

We need to wait until the executive order on higher education so that we know what we can do and what we cannot do.

- How can the Faculty Senate or faculty get ready for the change in the state administration and its potential impact on mitigation policies?

President Sands shared the concern about removing mask and booster mandates. There are data showing that some universities without such mandates have more severe cases. Even if Virginia Tech does not have a mask mandate, it is likely that most students may still respect the classroom setting and choose to wear masks in classrooms.

Robert Weiss invited President Sands to provide closing remarks. President Sands thanked all faculty members for all they have done over the past five semesters during the pandemics. President Sands also welcomed everyone to join the State of the University Address next week. On behalf of the Faculty Senate, Robert Weiss thanked President Sands again for the time he spent with the faculty senators.

7. Adjourn

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made and seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 4:24PM.