

Early Faculty Engagement in Transformative Initiatives to Enhance Research, Teaching, and Engagement

A student asks a provocative question after a lecture that results in a continued discussion over a semester that leads to a fulfilling research experience that flowers into a career the student would never have considered without this series of events. I have now been at Virginia Tech long enough to see this progression take place several times, and I consider sparking a student's interest to the extent that their prospects fundamentally change and improve as among the proudest moments of my professional life. I know there are many faculty members who could tell similar stories because student interactions with faculty members at Virginia Tech are often life-altering experiences. Faculty members serve the university community in other ways as well. Almost all research grants that come to Virginia Tech are awarded to faculty members. The knowledge discovered and the research products generated by these grants make the world a better place. The community engagement efforts of faculty members extend and apply that knowledge and creativity throughout Virginia, the country, and the world. All told, the teaching, research, and engagement of faculty will propel us in our ambition to be recognized as one of the leading 21st-century global land-grant universities.

Yet every part of our community can make reasonable claims for their importance. Take away the students and why are we here? Without staff, what could we achieve? Without the various levels of administration, the operation would grind to a halt. The ongoing revision to shared governance at Virginia Tech asks us to recognize this interdependence and to make the most of it by bringing representatives of the different groups together in the right numbers at the right times.

One of the more exciting aspects of this revision is the realization that large changes or additions to our missions will be more fully implemented if the groups that will be impacted by those changes, that will be asked to carry them out, have a significant role in their development. The process we are creating, called the university mission initiative process, would bring representatives of senates and the administration together in small numbers to create proposals that address additions to or new ways of meeting our mission goals. Experiential Learning is the first initiative we are trying to develop through this process.

What appeals to me about this process is how it seeks to capitalize on our collective knowledge and leverage the benefits of genuine representative involvement to increase collective adoption of new policies or procedures. In any large organization, bringing the right talent to a piece of work can be hard to do, and convincing large groups to accept new ideas can be ever harder. While the university mission initiative process cannot solve these problems, it will help us minimize their negative impacts and should lead to better, more broadly trusted results.

More exciting to me, though, is the potential for this process to create moments and synergies very similar to the student experience I presented earlier. Since part of the UMI process is to give these small groups a clear charge and high degree of autonomy in the development of their proposals, members will be in a position to spark new ideas and see where they take them, initially free of the necessarily political process of gaining support for their ideas. Finding a way to free our creative and entrepreneurial energies is essential, as is making sure that ideas are genuinely supported to a degree that allows us to apply them in fact and not just

in word. The UMI process seeks to balance these phases of change and give them appropriate and necessary breathing space from each other, while also recognizing that both are essential.

If I have a request of you, it is that you continue to support the shared governance revision and the UMI process in particular. The hardest aspect of the kind of change that the president, provost, faculty, staff, a/p faculty, and students are trying to initiate is often cultural, and the tone you set at the top resounds. In particular, I ask that you consider the benefits of involving faculty early in the development phase of any substantial revision that impacts teaching, research, or engagement at Virginia Tech.