

Faculty Senate Constituency Report

Board of Visitors Meeting, 7-8 November 2021

Shared Governance Progress

As you are aware, we are in the process of creating a shared governance model that will increase the extent to which Virginia Tech employees and students collectively engage in policymaking, including the creation of major initiatives that impact the academic landscape of Virginia Tech. The President's Committee on Governance is putting the finishing touches on many aspects of the new shared governance model, which in the spring will move through our current governance system for review by the University Council, the President, and most importantly, you, the Board of Visitors. As you may know, the President's Committee on Governance reflects the new governance model in that all the constituency groups have a say in what this committee decides. Discussions within this committee are often difficult. The fact that we reach consensus around workable solutions indicates that we are more than friends, we are family who share the desire to make Virginia Tech a better place for all of us.

Academic Freedom and Targeted Harassment

Over the past few months, we have seen targeted harassment of faculty and students by groups outside and within Virginia Tech. There is no context in which this is acceptable, and the faculty of Virginia Tech stand with those who have been targeted and will work to prevent harassment in the future. While harassment obviously hurts those who are targeted, it also has a profound impact on academic freedom generally, since the pain its victims endure can intimidate others who fear similar retribution for their scholarly views or simply because of their identity, and we need to begin an honest conversation about how to keep free speech from being weaponized. Our unity is our defense, for the intent of harassment is to force people into silence and isolation. That unity begins here, with the Board of Visitors and the example you set for our community.

Modesty and Community

The "know it all professor" is easy to spoof for good reason, as our extensive though often limited expertise can make it easy for us to lose sight of how quickly we, like most everyone else, can be out of our depth. When you are considered an "expert," the importance of intellectual modesty can easily be forgotten.

I think of modesty often in the context of my first two topics. Just the phrase "shared governance" speaks to the collective nature of what we do here and the importance of remembering that no single group can make Virginia Tech run. Harassment, on the other hand, requires a breakdown in the normal psychological circuits that stop someone from believing that their views are not only correct but warrant forceful imposition on others.

I believe there are difficult times ahead that will try our ability to hear each other. It is only natural that the divisions in our country show up on our campus, and this is an era that rewards taking positions over engaging our differences, that has seen harassment and physical violence become more acceptable and even rewarded.

As a “know it all” professor, I readily admit that I do not know how to overcome these trends other than to reinforce and extend our bonds. Talking to each other the way we do in this room and through shared governance generally is a form of breaking bread together. You get to know something about a person beyond their job or views, and that connection makes it more likely that you will see and respond to their humanity.

Most faculty, though, will never meet anyone on the Board of Visitors. There are twenty-six hundred of us and of course far fewer of you. I see tremendous value, though, in closing that distance between the board and faculty, and invite every member of the Board of Visitors to first speak to me and Robin Queen, the vice president of the Faculty Senate, then the Faculty Senate Cabinet, and finally to the Faculty Senate as a whole.

It may seem like a small thing, but taking extra steps right now to make sure that we are talking with and listening to each other will help us get through a demanding time.