

Faculty Constituency Report

Robert Weiss (President, Faculty Senate)

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As we begin a new academic year the faculty are optimistic about the upcoming year and are thrilled to have students back on campus ready to learn. With that excitement and optimism also comes some concerns that I want to share with you from our faculty.

Given that COVID-19 will be part of our lives for the foreseeable future, Virginia Tech has plans in place to address another outbreak should one occur. Knowing there is a real possibility that faculty and students will be impacted by COVID going forward or other infectious disease, it is pivotal that we not lose sight of the ongoing impacts from the last few years that are still resulting in both physical and mental challenges that are both seen and unseen. The changes to how we live and work have taken a toll that we are only beginning to assess. Though vaccines, masking, and other measures help us battle the virus, the ongoing care and consideration that we need to extend to each other requires a different kind of attention and effort. While some have come through this period unscathed, others continue to battle medical, economic, familial, and psychological challenges directly attributable to the virus. As we return to “business as usual,” I ask you each to remember that for some unknown number of us, “business as usual” is impossible. As part of the Hokie Nation, we must continue to work together to address our collective and individual needs in what will remain a challenging environment. Though there are financial and practical limits to what Virginia Tech can accommodate, it is critical that we try to do everything possible for community members who need our help and understanding. As we return to a more normal campus experience it is going to be essential that we begin to develop plans for how we navigate this changing landscape. What can we do to be prepared if students or faculty need to attend classes virtually due to illness? Do we have the capacity to continue to offer the VT experience to our students if faculty are unable to teach or do we need to consider online/recorded options being a possibility in situations when faculty are unable to teach? Is there a need for all classes to be able to be offered in a hybrid mode for students to be able to attend virtually or watch a recorded lecture if they are feeling unwell and need to be away from class for a few weeks? Given these possibilities, what infrastructure and IT support need to be in place to make this possible? While we do not have answers to all of these questions, we are hoping that this can be the beginning of a discussion about how we better plan for operational challenges in the future.

We have spent some time together during the retreat discussing freedom of expression. I wanted to touch on two distinctions between academic freedom and first amendment freedom of speech in academic and non-academic settings. As free as we each are to express our views on the Los Angeles Lakers, climate change, yogurt versus ice cream or any other topic, the academic disciplinary boundaries of a given subject place natural and necessary limits on what will or should be discussed in a particular classroom. For example, while a student’s views on the separation of church and state may be appropriate in a class on politics or American history, they do not appear to align as well with discussions in a physics or geology classroom. In academia, the context of speech must be considered when evaluating freedom of expression.

Additionally, the content of speech must be evaluated in an academic setting in a manner and at a level that would be atypical for everyday speech. We expect faculty to convey their disciplinary knowledge and expertise and evaluate students based on the student's ability to understand and acquire this knowledge and expertise. Though it is critical for faculty and students to coexist in an environment of give and take, of debate and doubt, there is always a body of knowledge that must be accepted as the standard against which students will be evaluated. If a student believes that the tectonic theory of continental formation is wrong or that Shakespeare didn't write Hamlet, they are and should be free to make their case. In the end, we expect faculty to uphold the disciplinary standards that they have acquired over years of study and practice and challenge students to grow and learn in an environment of mutual respect and to engage in civil discussions both within and outside of the classroom. At a bar or picnic, in Boston or Dallas, in anger or at peace, people are free to say and believe whatever they want. However, the right to express these thoughts freely and applied without limitations within a classroom setting, would make it impossible for faculty to keep students on topic to achieve course learning objectives or to hold students to disciplinary standards, the idea of instruction would fall apart. Virginia Tech and its faculty must maintain the highest standards of instruction in which we are able to educate and broaden the world view of the next generation while holding the disciplinary standards.

The future of higher education is changing, and Virginia Tech must remain committed to our students and faculty to ensure that we balance freedom of speak with Academic Freedom and the need to provide a collegial and challenging learning environment.